GENESISシリーズ
境界線上のホライゾン
きみとあさまで
I下
川上稔
イラスト・さとやす（TENKY）

特-2

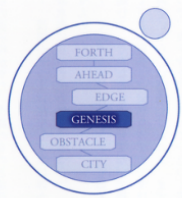
GENESISシリーズ 境界線上のホライゾン

きみとあさまで I〈下〉

川上 稔

特典文庫

BCXA 0406



The 1st.GENESIS

NOT FOR SALE

かわかみ みのる
川上 稔

1975年1月3日生まれ。東京出身。アニメ監修で多忙の中、特典小説の執筆のみならず、キャラコメ脚本、設定資料集の解説、作詞活動までこなし八面六臂の大活躍。その活力は一体どこから湧いてくるんでしょう？

【特典文庫】
GENESISシリーズ境界線上のホライゾン
きみとあさまで I〈上〉
きみとあさまで I〈下〉

【電撃文庫】
GENESISシリーズ
境界線上のホライゾン I〈上〉〈下〉
境界線上のホライゾン II〈上〉〈下〉
境界線上のホライゾン III〈上〉〈中〉〈下〉
境界線上のホライゾン IV〈上〉〈中〉〈下〉

イラスト:さとやす（TENKY）

山形生まれの栃木育ち「ホットケーキの生地で挟んだアイスおいしい。ベスト溜けかけ具合を探すぎの日」ベスト溜けかけに見えてちょっと属くそんな午後。

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カバー／旭印刷

『ミトツダイラの見通し』

ミトツダイラは、朝のランニングから帰ってくると、まずシャワーを浴びる。

温水だ。シャワーはバスタブの上で浴びているので、汗を流した後はバスタブに湯をためて軽い行水になっていく。バスタブは洋式で底が浅いため、髪を外にこぼして仰向けで本など読むか、鰐せになってバスタブから顎と両腕を垂らしてくつろぐのが常だ。

今日は鰐せ。足で溜まっていく湯を軽く蹴立てると、その動きで湯から突き出した尻が揺れる。暖かい流れが丸みを下って来て、脚の側にこぼれ伝うのがくすぐったい。腰の揺らしで波を立てるのも好きだし、湯が凝れるのも武蔵上では充分な贅沢だ。

そんな朝の余裕を得ながら、ミトツダイラは今日の事を思う。

……今日は、教導院に行って、どうしましょうか……。

朝食の予定も決めていない。外で頂くのもいい。昼食も、放課後の予定も、不確かで嬉しい。持ち企業や香水の工房もあるが、空いた時間は確かにあるのだ。『何をしようか迷う』という選択肢を選ばなければ、何でも出来る気もする。

「久しぶりにヴィヌラの練習を――」

と思っていると、表示枠が展開した。友人設定で自動展開するのは浅間からのものだ。それは通話状態になっており、何事ですの、とミトツダイラは思う。

「どうしましたの？　智」

「あ、ミト、ええと、喜美にさっき人体の比重について聞いて――、あ、すみません、よく考えたらミトに聞いても意味が無いことでした。すみません、別の話、何かしましょうか？　今年もまた境内の裏で焔が採れまして、柔らかい内に煮ておこうと思ってるんですよねえ」

「な、何ですのその殺々と距離をとっていく話題の作り方!!」

すると今度は喜美からの表示枠が来た。浅間のものと並列するそれからは、何故か桶を持った喜美が映っており、

「フフ、ミトツダイラ！　浅間がチンーコ生やして泉に浮かせて軍艦ごっこやってるっていうから、これから私達は青水艦になって沈めに行くわよ！」

「え？　箔じゃありませんの」

「比喩！　比喩表現よ！　ぐんぐん伸びてスパァンって切るのよ！　――え？　何よ愚弟、スパァンって言われると編む？　そんなこと心配してないで型取りしなさいって」

「ちょ、ちょっと待って下さい喜美！　型取りって何です!?」

「ククク、やあねえ、何をいやらしい想像してんのよ、まずはチョコからね愚弟！」

何か悪い予感がしたので、表示枠を叩き割って一息つく事にする。

ええ、どうせすぐにいたたまれなくなって出る気もしますけど。

「……浮くって、身体全体のことじゃないですわよね」

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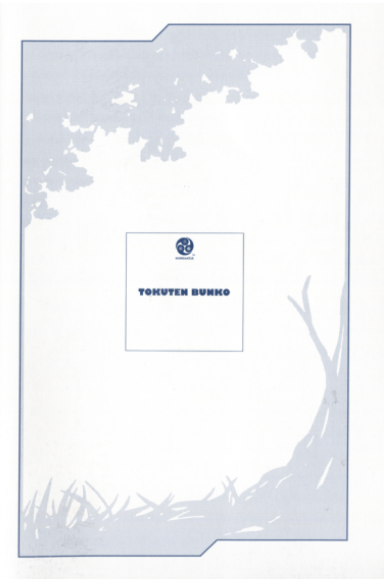


Inside Story

Mitotsudaira's Perspective

After returning from her morning run, Mitotsudaira would take a shower.

She used warm water. The shower sprayed into the bathtub, so after washing off her sweat, she would let the water gather in the tub and take a light bath. The Western bathtub was shallow, so she usually either let her hair fall out of the tub while lying on her back reading a book, or she would lay face down with her chin and arms hanging out.

Today, she chose the latter option. She lightly kicked at the water gathered by her feet and the movement caused her butt to wiggle where it stuck up above the water. The warm water tickled as it flowed down the roundness toward her legs. She liked making waves by shaking her hips, and having enough warm water for it to overflow was a luxury aboard the Musashi.

While enjoying this morning relaxation, she thought about the coming day.

…I have to go to school, but what else should I do today?

She had no plans for breakfast yet. She could even pick something up somewhere. She also enjoyed having no set plans for lunch or afterschool. She did have her business and the perfume factory to deal with, but she still had some spare time. As long as she did not choose the "worry about what to do" option, she felt like she could do anything.

"Maybe I should practice the viola for the first time in a while."

As she thought about that, a sign frame opened. It was from Asama who was designated as a friend, so it opened automatically. It set up

a conversation link, so she wondered what this was about.

“What is it, Tomo?”

“Oh, Mito. Um, Kimi just asked me about the relative weights of the human body, and… Oh, sorry. Now that I think about it, asking you wouldn’t be much help. Sorry. How about we talk about something else? We gathered some bamboo shoots behind the shrine again this year, so I’m thinking about cooking them while they’re still soft.”

“Wh-why are you shifting the conversation further and further away from me!?”

Meanwhile, a sign frame from Kimi appeared right next to the one from Asama. For some reason, it showed Kimi holding a bucket.

“Heh heh. Mitotsudaira! Asama grew a penis and is playing warship by letting it float in the spring, so we’re about to head over, become submarines, and sink it!”

“Eh? So this isn’t about bamboo shoots?”

“That’s a euphemism! A euphemism! You stretch it out and then – whack! – cut it away! …Eh? What is it, foolish brother? Why did you shrink back when I said ‘whack’? Stop worrying about that and get ready to make the mold.”

“W-wait a second, Kimi! What do you mean make the mold!?”

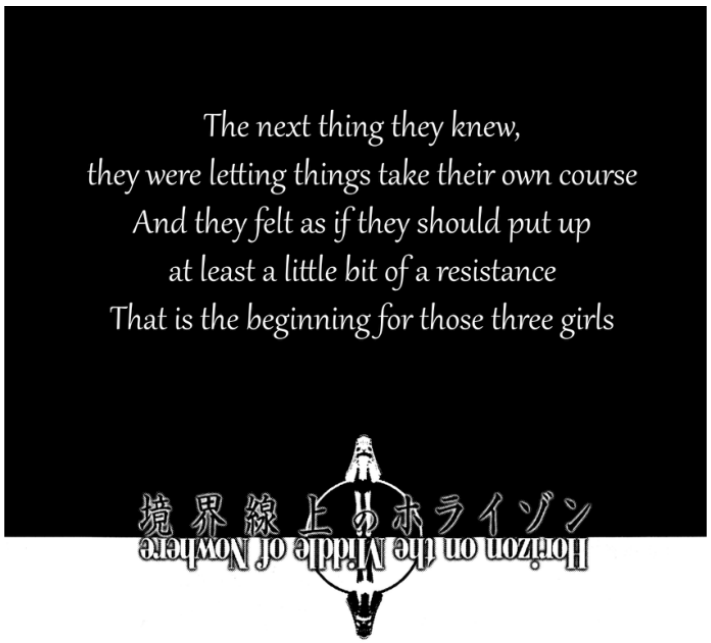
“Heh heh heh. C’mon now. What kind of indecent things are you imagining? …Start with a chocolate one, foolish brother!”

Mitotsudaira had a bad feeling about this, so she broke the sign frames and took a breath.

Although she had a feeling she would not be able to stay in the bath much longer now.

“…I’m guessing they weren’t talking about letting your entire body float.”

Title Page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they were letting things take their own course
And they felt as if they should put up
at least a little bit of a resistance
That is the beginning for those three girls
境界線上のホライゾン
Horizon on the Middle of Nowhere

Kimitoasamade

Chapter 3 "Hasty Ones of the Passing Shadows" ···· P5
Chapter 4 "Hidden Ones at a Place of Passage" ····· P29
Chapter 5 "Socializer at a Place of Learning" ····· P71
Chapter 6 "Revealed Ones at a Place of Passage" ··· P85
Chapter 7 "Sweethearts at a Place of Wishes" ····· P123
Chapter 8 "Singer Atop the Box" ····· P145

I

B

Kawakami Minoru
Illustrations: Satoyasu (TENKY)
Design: Watanabe Kouichi (2725 Inc)

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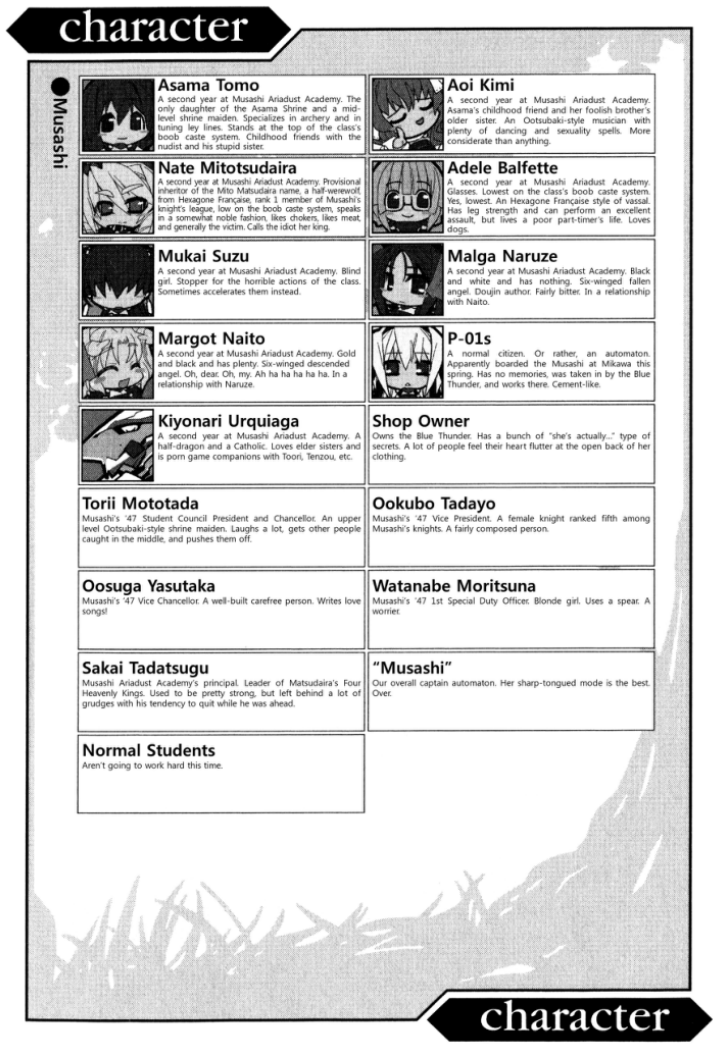
Characters


character
● Musashi
Asama Tomo
A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. The only daughter of the Asama Shrine and a mid-level shrine maiden. Specializes in archery and in tuning ley lines. Stands at the top of the class's boob caste system. Childhood friends with the nudist and his stupid sister.
Aoi Kimi
A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Asama's childhood friend and her foolish brother's older sister. An Ootsubaki-style musician with plenty of dancing and sexuality spells. More considerate than anything.
Nate Mitotsudaira
A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Provisional inheritor of the Mito Matsudaira name, a half-wereworlf from Hexagone Française, rank 1 member of Musashi's knight's league, low on the boob caste system, speaks in a somewhat noble fashion, likes chokers, likes meat, and generally the victim. Calls the idiot her king.
Adele Balfette
A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Glasses. Lowest on the class's boob caste system. Yes, lowest. An Hexagone Française style of vassal. Has leg strength and can perform an excellent assault, but lives a poor part-timer's life. Loves dogs.
Mukai Suzu
A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Blind girl. Stopper for the horrible actions of the class. Sometimes accelerates them instead.
Malga Naruze
A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Black and white and has nothing. Six-winged fallen angel. Doujin author. Fairly bitter. In a relationship with Naito.
Margot Naito
A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Gold and black and has plenty. Six-winged descended angel. Oh, dear. Oh, my. Ah ha ha ha ha ha. In a relationship with Naruze.
P-01s
A normal citizen. Or rather, an automaton. Apparently boarded the Musashi at Mikawa this spring. Has no memories, was taken in by the Blue Thunder, and works there. Cement-like.
Kiyonari Urquiaga
A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. A half-dragon and a Catholic. Loves elder sisters and is porn game companions with Toori, Tenzou, etc.
Shop Owner
Owns the Blue Thunder. Has a bunch of "she's actually..." type of secrets. A lot of people feel their heart flutter at the open back of her clothing.
Torii Mototada
Musashi's '47 Student Council President and Chancellor. An upper level Ootsubaki-style shrine maiden. Laughs a lot, gets other people caught in the middle, and pushes them off.
Ookubo Tadayo
Musashi's '47 Vice President. A female knight ranked fifth among Musashi's knights. A fairly composed person.
Oosuga Yasutaka
Musashi's '47 Vice Chancellor. A well-built carefree person. Writes love songs!
Watanabe Moritsuna
Musashi's '47 1st Special Duty Officer. Blonde girl. Uses a spear. A worrier.
Sakai Tadatsugu
Musashi Ariadust Academy's principal. Leader of Matsudaira's Four Heavenly Kings. Used to be pretty strong, but left behind a lot of grudges with his tendency to quit while he was ahead.
"Musashi"
Our overall captain automaton. Her sharp-tongued mode is the best. Over.
Normal Students
Aren't going to work hard this time.
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- Normal Students: Aren't going to work hard this time.

Glossary

F

•**Far East:** Name of the Divine States after the Harmonic Unification War.

G

•**God of War:** A giant humanoid machine that people combine with to move.
•**Graduation:** No limit for nations other than the Far East. Far Easterners must graduate at 18.

H

•**Harmonic Territory:** Locations where the fallen Harmonic World Divine States unified with the real world while breaking apart.
•**Harmonic Unification War:** A war between the harmonic world residents and the real world (Divine States) residents after the destruction of the harmonic world. The harmonic world residents won and began a provisional rule over the Divine States.
•**Harmonic World:** A former alternate space that copied the Divine States. Preserved through ley line control.
•**Hexagone Française:** Mouri clan + France.
•**History Recreation:** Recreating the Testament descriptions to maintain the path the world takes.

I

•**Inherited Name:** The name of a historical figure given to an appropriate individual for the history recreation.
•**Internal Blessings:** blessings stored within oneself.
•**IZUMO:** The Far East's largest corporation. The headquarters for Far Eastern shrines and the corporation that built the Musashi.

J

•**Judge/Judgment:** Means "understood". Used by criminals.

K

•**K.P.A. Italia:** Association of Aki States + Union of Italian City States.

L

•**Ley Line:** The thicker of the pathways through which ether flows.

A

•**Academy:** An educational facility. Used as the center of political and military power. Tend to have many branch schools.
•**Academy Rules:** The basic laws upheld between academies. Agreed to by the Testament Union.
•**Apocalypse:** The end of the world. 1648 when the Testament's history descriptions end.
•**ATELL:** The smallest unit of ether. Used for spells.

B

•**Blessings:** The amount of ether needed for a human to exist for one hour. 3600 ATELL. Conversion unit for a spell's ATELL consumption.

C

•**Catholic:** The old mainstream version of Tsirhc.
•**Chancellor's Officers:** An organization led by the chancellor which leads the academy and performs work such as defense.
•**Contradiction Allowance:** The foundational ability of the world. Allows the simultaneous existence of all sorts of physical laws.

D

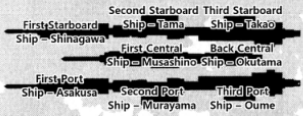
•**Divine States:** Former name of the Far East.
•**Divine Weapon:** A weapon that, unlike a normal weapon, has a unique ability.

E

•**Emperor:** A divine individual who is said to control the ley lines using the Imperial Regalia in Kyou. Does not interfere with the world.
•**England:** Uses a floating island and does not control any Far Eastern land or Far Eastern daimyo.
•**Ether:** Component that makes up contradiction-allowing space.
•**Ether Engine:** An engine that uses ether's space-altering ability. The effect changes based on the internal crest.
•**Ether Fuel:** Ether that has been purified into fuel. Used as External Blessings or for ether engines.
•**Ether Reactor:** A reactor that extracts and purifies ether from the air. Has a lower output than a ley line reactor, but is relatively safe.
•**External Blessings:** Blessings accumulated outside of oneself. Ether fuel is an example.

words

•**Shirasago Enterprises:** IZUMO's shrine brand.



•**Sign Frame:** Spell device needed to use each religion's basic protection.
•**Spell:** Causing a miracle in a certain space by processing ether.
•**Student Council:** The organization that handles an academy's domestic and foreign affairs.
•**Substitution:** Offering something to please a god instead of using Blessings to activate a spell.

T

•**Tes/Testament:** Means "understood".
•**Testament:** A history book that provides the history of the earth's previous age. There are seven pairs and excerpts.
•**Testament Descriptions:** History of the earth's previous age that is automatically updated by the Testament. However, it stopped updating after the description for 1648.
•**Testament Union:** An organization meant to lead the history recreation.
•**Tres España:** Oouchi and Ootomo clans + Spain. Currently includes Portugal.
•**Tsirhc:** A religion which places the Son of God at the top. Worships the Testament.

M

•**Magic:** Folk spells currently under persecution in Europe.
•**M.H.R.R.:** Hashiba clan + Holy Roman Empires.
•**Mikawa:** Destroyed by the collapse of Lord Motonobu's ley line reactor.
•**Mlasi:** A later non-Tsirhc religion that also worships the Testament.
•**Mouse:** A spirit beast device to act as an intermediary between the Shinto religion and its musicians. Other religions use different names.
•**Musashi:** Aerial city ship. The sole independent territory allowed for the Far East.
•**Musashi Ariadust Academy:** The Far East's representative academy which exists on Okutama of Musashi.
•**Musician:** A religion's worshiper.

O

•**Offering:** Providing a god with something they will enjoy or Internal Blessings.
•**Orei Metallo/Nero:** Ore or water containing ether. Can be used as ether fuel.

P

•**P.A. Oda:** Oda clan + Ottomans.
•**Protestant:** A new style of Tsirhc created to escape the corruption of Catholicism and to adjust to the new age.

R

•**Religion:** Organizations or groups that worship a god or the Testament.

S

•**Shinto:** Far Eastern religion. Worships the Far Eastern gods and uses divine music spells.

●Asama's Plans●

"Sis! Sis! What are you and Asama going to do!?"

"Heh heh heh. Well, the Musashi just arrived at the floating island of Itsukushima. To prepare for the spring academy festival's gagaku festival, we'll be tuning the ley lines on the theatre ship. And in shrine maiden outfits!!"

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[First Starboard Ship – Shinagawa/Second Starboard Ship – Tama/Third Starboard Ship – Takao/First Central Ship – Musashino/Back Central Ship – Okutama/First Port Ship – Asakusa/Second Port Ship – Murayama/Third Port Ship – Oume]

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- Sign Frame: Spell device needed to use each religion's basic protection.
- Spell: Causing a miracle in a certain space by processing ether.
- Student Council: The organization that handles an academy's domestic and foreign affairs.
- Substitution: Offering something to please a god instead of using Blessings to activate a spell.

T

- Tes/Testament: Means “understood”.
- Testament: A history book that provides the history of the earth’s previous age. There are seven pairs and excerpts.
- Testament Descriptions: History of the earth’s previous age that is automatically updated by the Testament. However, it stopped updating after the description for 1648.
- Testament Union: An organization meant to lead the history recreation.
- Tres España: Oouchi and Ootomo clans + Spain. Currently includes Portugal.
- Tsirhc: A religion which places the Son of God at the top. Worships the Testament.

Asama's Plans

Toori: Sis! Sis! What are you and Asama going to do!?

Kimi: Heh heh heh. Well, the Musashi just arrived at the floating island of Itsukushima. To prepare for the spring academy festival's gagaku festival, we'll be tuning the ley lines on the theatre ship. And in shrine maiden outfits!!

Chapter 3: Hasty Ones of the Passing Shadows

What did we do

When we were beginners?

Point Allocation (Sleep, Maybe?)

The sky was white.

It was a vast, oblong, and cocoon-like sky.

An aerial ship with three port and starboard ships and two central ships floated in the center of that sky. The name “Musashi” was printed on the bows of the ships.

It was a giant white and black ship, and below it…

“Margot! Take care of things from behind! This is the last one for today, so let’s try working together!”

Black wings rode a giant white feather duster below the second port ship on their way to the third ship.

The wings belonged to a black-haired girl wearing Musashi’s girl’s uniform A Magie Figur license plate was opened on the back of the feather duster. It gave her name as “Malga Naruze”, identified her as both a second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy and a Technohexen belonging to Musashi’s aerial delivery guild, and…

“Currently in training. Use caution when nearby.”

Naruze moved forward, leaving Naito behind her.

She tore through the wind and looked to the white stealth barrier below her and the ships’ hulls lined up overhead.

“I see him!”

Up ahead, a figure flew quickly below Murayama, the second port ship. It was a half-dragon with a mostly white shell.

His arms were sticking forward and his legs were rotated ninety degrees outward for his flight form. He was flying using his arms’ main thrusters.

“Leave it to Urquiaga to not hold back even in training!”

Naruze held her right hand forward and drew a crop mark frame Magie Figur.

She sketched the half-dragon in the center and added effect lines, but…

…He isn’t turning around?

In her image, Urquiaga showed no sign of looking back her way. That made it look like he had not noticed her approach, but at the same time…

“I’m not so sure.”

Half-dragons had a wide field of vision. By moving his eyeballs in his eye sockets, he could check behind him without having to turn his head in midflight.

Thus, Naruze decided approaching him from behind or the sides would be dangerous.

After all, this was not their first time joining him for early morning aerial mobility training.

This was the eighth time. For Urquiaga, it acted as combat training as an inquisitor. For the Technohexen, it acted as training for the races and mock battles they used to determine their ranking in the delivery business.

Their opponent was an aerial half-dragon. It would be hard to find another human-sized race with more aerial mobility and physical combat skill. It was a rare race, so they were fortunate to have him as a training partner.

…It really is strange.

Naruze thought back to middle school.

Back then, the Technohexen and Urquiaga had not had any clear connections.

They had of course all joined together in the jokes and discussions with the others, but that did not mean they had ever directly faced each other.

Then the previous year, he had suddenly asked them if they were willing to join his combat training as Technohexen.

Naruze had wondered what had led to that, but she had known that the half-dragon had been undergoing personal training since middle school…no, even before.

During elementary school, Urquiaga had run across the ships each morning.

By middle school, he had been flying between the ships on his own. Because the Technohexen had been undergoing training and instructions to join the delivery business, they had seen the half-dragon receive warnings from the guard stations and transportation guild a few times. A license was needed to fly above, between, or outside the Musashi's ships. One could earn a license at twelve, but Urquiaga had not had one at the time.

The initial license to fly within the Musashi's airspace was restricted, but those restrictions were removed after spending two years without a flight infraction, logging a total of 1100 hours of flight time, and passing a test.

When the Technohexen, Urquiaga, and the other hopefuls had arrived at the testing location on Asakusa…

…*A bunch of those idiots showed up.*

Asama and the others had carried in a ton of boxed lunches. Naruze still remembered that Mitotsudaira, who had joined the others again by that time, had carried most of them.

When eating lunch before the results were announced, she remembered finding the unfamiliar Far Eastern food surprisingly good.

…I didn't feel like asking who exactly those idiots had shown up to root for, though.

"But," said Naruze as she instructed the feather duster to accelerate. "With all of them there, we could hardly hold back when we flew."

Naruze soared toward Urquiaga who flew ahead and above.

The half-dragon had a wide field of vision, but he still had a blind spot when flying: below his lower stomach.

During his high-speed flight, the half-dragon had his stomach oriented down and his face pointing forward. In order to find and attack a target in the sky or on the ground, his eyes had the clearance needed to see everything on his level and everything on down to the ground, both in front of him and to the sides.

He could even see behind him, but not even a half-dragon could see through his own body.

When flying, his shoulders and torso were in the way, and he could not see the area from his lower chest to lower stomach.

Naruze felt this was a weakness born of the half-dragon's great power.

…When flying, no enemy can catch up to them from behind.

Only fellow half-dragons could catch up, so their vision reached to the sides and behind to check on everything at the altitude they lived in.

The lower stomach blind spot was where an enemy would attack from the surface, but taking flight from the ground provided poor initial speed. Nothing taking off from the ground could catch up to an airborne half-dragon.

Naruze had once asked Urquiaga how he dealt with that blind spot.

"Your stomach's wide open when you fly. You might be able to

ignore anyone that flies after you, but aren't high-speed flying objects like anti-air cannons a problem?"

"In those cases, I can descend to the surface and wreak delightful havoc on the anti-air equipment. Flying right into anti-air fire would be a poor strategic choice."

"But not everyone can pull that off."

"You can, can't you?"

"Um, anti-air equipment tends to be pretty strongly defended. Only races with sturdy shells can head there without issue."

"No need to hold back. Go ahead and say how cool I am."

This was why she hated half-dragons. But…

"Why are you worried about strategy? Don't you want to be an inquisitor?"

"Judge. If I pass the inquisitor trainee test in the second year, the path to becoming the 2nd Special Duty Officer will open."

"…What are you talking about?"

"Well." The half-dragon nodded. "The 2nd Special Duty Officer is in charge of administering justice. If I become an inquisitor with that on my resume, my future is essentially assured. Of course, as you two have trained with me, I will overlook the fact that you are Technohexen."

There was something in his tone that made her think he was lying. It was like the words themselves were accurate, but his true feelings were different.

However, it was not the Technohexen way to interfere with others. So…

"We're not going to let you win next time just because you'll overlook us in the future, so prepare yourself."

That “next time” was now.

This was their eighth match. They exchanged attacks while making a circuit below the Musashi and then discussed the results. They repeated the process from five to six in the morning. Each circuit, they would swap out who was in the lead. Partway through, one of them would reverse their circuit for a head-on confrontation. Lately, they had grown more accustomed to reading the currents of the morning sky, so they would move out from under the ships and fly between or above them as well.

And this was probably their last confrontation for this match.

…So we need to use everything at our disposal.

Urquiaga was just about to arrive below Takao.

He was going to take a gentle right turn to pass below Okutama without slowing down.

“…No.”

The half-dragon pulled back his shoulders. He always tensed up like that before a sudden ascent or descent.

Seeing that, Naruze lifted the corner of her mouth a little. She raised her ether drawing pen in her right hand.

“Ridding yourself of the blind spot? Not bad!”

From further behind, Naito saw Urquiaga eliminate his blind spot.

…He’s ascending!

The half-dragon’s vision was restricted by his arms and torso, so he could not see below his lower stomach when flying.

So…

“He moved his vision by tilting his body to ascend!”

If he could not see below his lower stomach, he could bend his entire body back to see everything behind him at once.

The method was easier said than done during high-speed flight. After all, he was still below Takao. Ascending here would mean colliding with the bottom of the ship.

Also, simply checking behind him would not hold his opponent back. He would need some kind of show of force to keep his opponent out of the blind spot in the future.

His choice was not simply to ascend.

Like riding a wave, he bent his body back but did not immediately ascend.

“He adjusted his output to continue forward while positioned diagonally!?”

He had taken his ascension position, but he was using the inertia of his great speed to continue forward without rising or falling.

His vision now covered everything behind him.

“…!”

Their eyes met. They were too distant to actually see each other’s eyes, but Naito was still certain of it.

So she activated a spell and targeted his tilted back and main wings.

“Herrlich!!”

She used a double acceleration spell. It was a spell she was developing for long-distance sniping.

The acceleration fired a one yen coin meant for mock battles.

The wind roared.

“It doesn’t fly as far because it’s light, but it can make it this far!”

The bullet flew forward.

As he flew ahead, Urquiaga realized how troublesome his opponents were.

…They're firing now!?

This was not the same firing technique as in their previous matches. It was from nearly twice the distance and it was extremely accurate.

This was a Technohexen sniper shot.

He understood how it worked.

Before, Naito had only used one Magie Figure for her firing acceleration spell. She had placed it near her hands at the brush of her broom and she had thrown the coin in there to fire it.

But this time, she had used two.

One on the broom's brush and one at the other end.

"She thought this through."

The one near her hands had accelerated the coin and the one at the other end had reaccelerated it. Raising the initial speed allowed for a longer distance shot and stabilized the ballistic trajectory.

The extra effort needed to activate and control the double spell meant it was likely meant for use on the surface.

If she was testing it literally "on the fly", then…

"She's a diversion!!"

Urquiaga was certain that Naito's attack was a diversion.

She was sniping him from further away than ever before, but that was meant to draw his attention.

A half-dragon had a wide field of vision, but that was based on his

eyeballs' range of movement. If his eyes were fixed on a single target, his vision narrowed.

That was Naito's intent here.

She was a diversion.

Even if she was using a double acceleration spell sniping technique, she was not on the surface. The wind would be too strong, and…

"She has to worry about the ocean!!"

Overhead, Takao's hull was thinly surrounded by the virtual ocean. That ocean was constantly being created from below to provide buoyancy to the giant ship. It would break up or whip up air currents, creating gentle but unpredictable gusts. So…

"…!"

Naito's ballistic trajectory wavered and veered off course. The light 1 yen coin for mock battles probably played a role. A ten yen coin probably would have reached him.

However, this was based in the rules of a mock battle.

The attack did not matter if it did not reach him. Its only purpose was as a diversion.

"There!!"

Urquiaga guessed the other one was trying to reach his blind spot.

He moved his right eye and found Naruze.

She was trying to force her way below him.

"So you've come, Naruze!"

One hundred meters below him, a set of black wings was matching his orientation as it approached his blind spot with forceful speed. She took a descending course and raised her right hand toward him.

That hand held an ether pen, and…

…A guided firing spell!

It came.

A nearly hand-drawn arc sent two white bullets flying his way.

Naruze saw the movement Urquiaga took.

The sub-thrusters on the sides of his waist turned her way.

The two small armored wings were meant to release acceleration ether light, but during this mock battle, they did more than just provide acceleration.

“They’re firing!!”

The half-dragon used his sub-thrusters to fire down and to the back. He fired the masses of compressed air that had gathered inside the thrusters. It truly was an air cannon.

The shells had an effective range of about one hundred meters. The ether light surrounding them made them visible and they moved slowly. They were meant to crash into the enemy at extreme close range during a battle.

Normally, they would never have hit from this distance, but she was trying to enter his blind spot.

…So he knew my trajectory!!

Even as the compressed air came apart in the air, it flew right into her path. At this rate, she would collide with the bursting pressure, so she made a decision.

“Margot! …Let’s swap out!!”

Urquiaga realized the black wings flew back and away from his blind spot.

She was likely trying to escape the range of his air cannon as its shells burst, and he observed the action she chose.

…She's descending!

However, Naruze did more than just descend. She forcibly spread her six wings to brake. As she was pulled backwards, she stood up and performed a downward roundhouse kick on the acceleration brush of her feather duster.

She was forcibly slowing down and turning so she could ascend as soon as possible.

"How reckless."

Urquiaga was impressed, but he also felt her decision was dangerous. After all, when moving so quickly, allowing a shockwave to envelop the tips of the wings or other external points would strain her skeleton with the intense inertial force. Spreading her wings like that could pull a muscle, dislocate a joint, or even break a bone. But…

"…"

How troublesome, he thought.

He was training to be an inquisitor.

That profession was meant to oppose Technohexen.

But if Technohexen were willing to fight with such reckless abandon, his future might not be as peaceful as he had hoped.

In this early morning training, he was at a slightly higher level than them.

But even if they had to work together, they were still improving each and every time.

How troublesome, he thought again.

The worst part was how his future as an inquisitor was starting to

look different to him. If possible, he had wanted to defeat a cool Technohexen elder sister, win her heart when he showed off how cool he was by sparing her younger siblings, and earn both a conversion and a wife in the process. That was his glorious and *gracias*-tier vision of the future, but now it was looking like he would have to fight a serious battle against her, which left decent odds that she would end up hating him.

How troublesome. Why must these Technohexen so cruelly destroy my vision of the future?

However, it was true Technohexen were combat-oriented.

Naruze had already corrected her position and was soaring along in an ascension pose, just like him. Her acceleration caused her to overshoot him and move out ahead.

She may have been aiming for a pincer attack between her and Naito.

“What a troublesome duo!”

Urquiaga gathered his strength. They were about to move out from under Takao on the Okutama side. He decided it would be fun to ascend, pass over Okutama, and fly under Oume.

Naruze had moved forward, but her trajectory took her on a descending line. If they were both going to ascend, he would have the upper hand. He would finish his circuit of the Musashi without taking any damage and ahead of them, so he would have won.

But…

“…!?”

Something suddenly crashed into him from behind.

He had been hit.

“…!?”

Urquiaga had only been hit by a light impact, but the unexpected attack shook him and caused him to miss the timing for his ascent.

His shaking vision saw Naruze rise ahead of him. The black wings rose straight up into the sky between Okutama and Takao.

After regaining control, Urquiaga followed.

“Well done!”

After receiving an attack, he would have to get in one of his own or he would lose this circuit. He pursued her while also looking back to the one who had hit him.

“Naito!!”

She had only fired one sniper shot, but it had veered off course and missed.

It had not been a guided shot, so it could not have made a course correction.

He realized just how that bullet had reached him despite that.

“Did Naruze guide it!?”

…*We did it!*

Up ahead, Naruze clung to her ascending feather duster and confirmed their results.

Urquiaga had been hit because…

“Yes. It was thanks to the guiding line I drew.”

White Technomagie created positive power and black Technomagie created a negative power, so a guiding line drawn with Weiss Techno could pick up the Schwarz Techno bullet and send it back on track.

They had recently finished training the timing and how to draw the

guiding line.

Drawing a straight line in midair was unexpectedly difficult.

However, Urquiaga would not have seen the line directing the bullet toward him. At most, he would have seen a point of light. She was confident that was just how straight she had drawn the line toward the center of his vision.

So…

“Do you know why I moved ahead of you?”

She swung her right hand along Urquiaga’s path of ascension.

Her right pointed toward the half-dragon and then toward Naito behind him.

“Time to draw.”

She drew the line.

An image was drawn in Musashi’s sky.

White lines raced along to draw the lines representing the wind.

They were accompanied by the sound of firing and an explosion of air.

“Oh.”

The few people on the morning roads looked up to the white sky.

A white line rose from the valley-like gap between Takao and Okutama. The line drew a gentle spiral, but it also occasionally took quick, tearing movements.

“_____”

Cannon blasts and vibrations of air were exchanged by the three joined by the line.

The black wings did not give up her lead, the half-dragon forcibly tore at his opponent, and the golden wings kept her distance and fired as if the result was already decided.

The flying bullets and powers were dodged and adjusted as they flew between the three who seemed to dance above Okutama.

“Ha ha!!”

They all laughed out loud in the air.

“Let’s settle this by using everything at our disposal!!”

Naito released her attack and began a new tactic.

The mock bottle had devolved into melee, so it was not time for sniping, so…

“Activate three at once!”

This was an unguided single-acceleration firing spell, but she used three of them.

She had one on the broom and one on either side of her. Part of her hoped she could bring it up to four in the future, but…

“Herrlich!”

She fired three shots: one along the guiding line and two to hold her opponent in check.

She wanted it to hit, but Urquiaga was more skilled in the air. She and Naruze had yet to fully combine their aerial mobility and firing, but his race was meant for the skies. Even when surrounded, he freely cut through the air to pursue Naruze.

…He’s pretty good!

They had a powerful classmate. She and Naruze had to work together to just barely catch up to him. Having someone like that so

close filled her with some impatience and with some relief. After all…

“We have a future.”

Despite the talk about the Apocalypse, they had their work in the delivery business. After this match, she would leave for the morning shift and Naruze would make a boxed meal for their evening work.

They were busy, but…

“I wonder.”

Those in the delivery business – especially the Technohexen – had begun some new activity lately.

They had bought their equipment from Edel Brocken and that company was making an additional request to hire a Musashi Technohexen as a tester for newly developed equipment. Something similar was probably happening in the other nations, but since Musashi’s Technohexen already had one tester, everyone was talking about it recently.

Of course, Naito and Naruze were a part of that.

…Ga-chan’s giving it a lot of thought, too.

They also had to think about how stiff they had been during the previous night’s rehearsal.

“Hmm…”

She groaned and saw Naruze shaking her head up ahead.

Urquiaga’s air cannon was coming, so…

“Oh.”

Naito quickly rolled downward in Okutama’s sky.

…Huh?

Musashi Ariadust Academy was below her. It was only six o’clock,

so not even the athletic clubs had begun morning practice and there would be no one in the schoolyard. However…

…Asama-chi?

A familiar face was looking up at her from below the bridge in front of the academy.

It was Asama.

The girl waved and Naito considered waving back, but…

“Oops!”

Urquiaga had fired an air cannon while she was distracted, so she dodged it and reaccelerated her broom.

Asama-chi must be thinking about the future and other things too, she thought.

Asama looked up at Naito, Naruze, and Urquiaga’s morning training.

Naito had nearly been hit by Urquiaga’s attack while looking her way.

…That was close!

Had it been her fault for waving? Thinking she had been careless, she followed the battle unfolding in the sky.

“…?”

Konoha, her false left eye, suddenly detected something in the distance.

When a weapon or ill will was directed her way, Konoha would automatically detect the shape pattern and ether reading. Based on the pattern, this reading was a weapon.

This was nothing unique. The Technohexen and other delivery

workers were often former warriors from other nations and they would use equipment bought from those governments. Even if the weaponry was deactivated, Konoha would often react to the overall shape. But…

“Is that…?”

It was the real deal.

A woman in an orange jacket rode a black *schale besen* in the distant sky above Musashino. She was Edel Brocken’s tester in Musashi. Her Urban Name was Wild Kamelie.

Her *schale besen* was a prototype from Edel Brocken. It was built to oppose the Technohexen trials, so it contained enough weaponry to accomplish that.

She was looking at Naito, Naruze, and Urquiaga, but why?

…I think I heard that Naito and Naruze have risen pretty high in the delivery business’s races and mock battles.

They were allowed to work together as a handicap for being newcomers, but they had apparently had a series of victories over the past six months.

Wild Kamelie was first in that ranking, so did this mean Asama’s two classmates had grown enough to enter that woman’s field of vision?

They’re really working hard, she thought while watching them soar through the sky and fly below Oume.

“Now, then.”

She too had something she needed to do.

Asama once more thought about what was coming. Once Mito and Kimi arrived at six, she would invite them to form a band with her.

However, even though she had asked them to meet her below the bridge, they might mistakenly show up on top of the bridge. If that happened, there was almost no chance of them noticing her under the bridge. To make sure that kind of mistake did not occur, she was planning to wait on top at least until the first one showed up, but…

…*Eh?*

Someone circled in from the side and moved underneath the bridge without noticing her on the top.

"…Phew."

The girl letting out a thoughtful sigh was Mitotsudaira.

Asama just about called out the girl's name and ran down, but then she stopped. After all…

…*Eh?*

Mitotsudaira did something without realizing Asama was watching.

"Oh, honestly!"

She shouted a complaint and punched the inner wall below the bridge.

Meanwhile, the white sky was growing brighter.

Chapter 4: Hidden Ones at a Place of Passage

CHAPTER 4
"Hidden Ones at a Place of Passage"
What should you worry about
Before getting embarrassed?
Point Allocation (Habit)

What should you worry about

Before getting embarrassed?

Point Allocation (Habit)

White surrounded everything.

It was morning on the aerial ship named Musashi. A stealth barrier covered not just the ship's sky, but the area below it as well. All external light was made to pass straight through the entire barrier field, so the entire area around the Musashi seemed to glow with a white light.

The Musashi was illuminated more than one would expect from the brightness of the sky, but…

"This pale morning light is so irritating," said a voice in the shadows.

A two building academy was located on the rear of Okutama, the Musashi's second central ship. Its sign said Musashi Ariadust Academy and a land bridge connected the second story main entrance to the schoolyard.

It was early enough in the morning that not even the athletic teams had begun practice, but Mitotsudaira looked to the school building's clock from the shadows below the bridge.

…Arriving at 5:30 may have been overdoing it…

The small Cerberus on her shoulder would occasionally lower its three heads to express its sleepiness. Seeing that brought a smile to her face, but she knew she would have to say goodbye eventually.

"Is this a bad habit of someone who's going to lose something?"

She looked to the clock again.

It was 5:55 AM. She could not help but feel glad, but she also had to be on her guard. After all…

"Is Tomo…really going to confess?"

She had read that below a bridge or below a tree was a common scene for students to confess. Early morning was also important. It supposedly happened more often during graduation season, but she had also heard things were different on the Musashi, where there was no escape.

But why had Tomo asked her to come here?

…If it is to confess…

To who?

“To me.”

Why?

“Well…”

She did not know.

What had she done to attract Tomo?

The night before, she had guessed that Asama wanted a marriage between girls because she was a shrine maiden that served her god and she could plan her life more easily with the support of a feudal lord like Mitotsudaira.

…But Tomo’s family runs the Asama Shrine, so she has plenty of income.

The shrine was in charge of Musashi’s Shinto contracts, ether management, divine transmissions, Shinto charms, and spell tools. It had more economic power on Musashi than a large corporation. So…

“Could she be after m-my body…?”

She blushed as she said that, but it was a possibility.

…She’s tall, her breasts would best be described with an ominous or

imposing sound effect, her butt is probably the same given how little space it leaves in the chair when she sits down, and…oh, dear. Why am I hanging my head and punching the bridge's column?

"I-I need to stop comparing her to myself! For Adele's sake!"

At any rate, she may have been attracted to Mitotsudaira in the same way that the wealthy are sometimes attracted to the poor.

…B-but my mother would require the most extreme sound effects imaginable.

But that was not a fair comparison. She had always assumed that was average, so when she had come to Musashi and gone through the school's physical examination, she had wondered the following:

…Maybe I'm the one that's average?

She could almost hear the others saying "no", so she punched the column.

"Anyway."

Given who her mother was, she had a chance for the future. Probably. Maybe. She tried not to think about the possibility of taking after her father.

But what was she supposed to do? She had always kind of known Tomo was a little crazy, but it seemed being a trueborn Musashi resident made her the real deal. Mitotsudaira had not expected Tomo to interfere with her own life plans, but it made sense if she thought of it like a natural disaster.

But, she thought.

Marriage between girls could be difficult for a variety of reasons, but she had provisionally inherited the name of Lord Mitsukuni of Mito Matsudaira. She had inherited a man's name, so it was possible she could marry a girl as part of the history recreation.

She checked the academy clock out of the corner of her eye and found it was 6:10.

It's almost time, she thought while preparing herself.

Asama's dreaded visit would come soon.

Mitotsudaira needed to face her directly and confront her properly, so she stepped out from below the bridge and faced the bow.

"Now, then."

She physically prepared herself and the Cerberus mimicked the motion on her head.

She could feel the morning wind on her skin and hair. The tuning had cleansed the wind as it circled around within the stealth barrier.

She thought it was a nice wind, but…

"Sniff…hm?"

The smells of morning life were beginning to fill that wind. Okutama contained a lot of students and Takao and Oume on either side contained a lot of Far Easterners, so…

…Is this…?

She smelled cooking fish, the steam of cooking rice, radishes, and vegetables mixed with the saltiness of miso soup. It all swirled up through the tube-like barrier walls.

…Kh.

Not eating breakfast had been a mistake.

A sticky dampness overflowed from the edge of her lower lip and she briefly swayed on her feet from the pressure of the wind. Meanwhile, the Cerberus on her head pushed itself further and further forward as it sniffed at the smell.

"Oh, whoops…"

To make sure the Cerberus did not fall off her head, she extended

her arms to the side to keep her balance. She somehow managed to keep her footing after taking one step forward and two steps back.

And then she heard a sudden voice from behind.

“Mito! Are you okay!?”

On the mental side, Mitotsudaira nearly died when Asama tapped her shoulder.

Asama saw Mitotsudaira literally jump.

…*Oh.*

To make sure the Cerberus did not fall off her head, she did not move her head much, so her butt hopped up instead. *She’s pretty good at adlibbing,* thought Asama, but she was also a little worried about the girl.

After all, she had been watching Mitotsudaira pace around below the bridge and occasionally punch the column, so she was acting a little odd.

In fact, she had had thought Mitotsudaira was strange before, but this meant it was the real deal. After all, normal people did not grope their own breasts out of the blue, punch a column, sniff at the air, and then start staggering around. That meant she was strange. It was a perfectly logical conclusion.

Mitotsudaira’s jump kept her airborne for a relatively long time, but once she landed, she turned toward Asama.

Her voluminous hair swung around and her face was red.

“T-T-T-T-T-Tomo!?”

“Um, yes. Are you okay?”

“W-well, um, uh…!”

She is acting weird, thought Asama with a mental tilt of her head.

To make her blush and grow this flustered, Asama must have caught her in a strange situation.

What had been going on with Mitotsudaira all this time?

Asama thought back over Mitotsudaira's previous actions.

…A half-werewolf hiding under the bridge while sniffing around and growing both embarrassed and flustered.

Asama used those keywords to realize what was going on.

"Mito."

"Wh-what!?"

Asama looked around to make sure they were alone, pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve, and handed it to Mitotsudaira. She placed her hands on Mitotsudaira's shoulders and nodded.

"Don't worry. Marking is a biological phenomenon. I don't sense anyone else around and I'll look the other way, so please continue."

"Why am I being treated like a strange girl!?"

…Huh? Is that not what this was?

Asama tilted her head in thought and looked to Mitotsudaira from close up. The girl was blushing and had her defenses up.

…Does she have a cold? She almost certainly has a fever.

Asama pressed her forehead against Mitotsudaira's.

Mitotsudaira saw two objects deserving of a sound effect in front of her eyes.

…Wh-what is this!?

They were huge. Asama was taller, so she had bent over to press her forehead against Mitotsudaira's. Mitotsudaira was not sure why she had done that, but her shoulders were pinned in place and a Far Eastern girls winter uniform was taking on an unreasonable shape right in front of her eyes.

Each one may not have been as big as her face, but they at least covered the distance between each eye's outer edge. In close quarters combat, they would certainly hide anything at her feet or on her torso.

Plus, the way they jiggled threw off her sense of perspective. But…

…I understand now! Only an amateur would call these a handicap!

They pose a risk of weighing you down, but they can also work to your advantage in combat!

Larger breasts act as an anchor when attacking and increase the strength of the blow. Now I know why my mother is so powerful. If she has the strength to control all that weight, it means she has plenty of fundamental strength. That's why I can't beat her. There's nothing I can do. I can't beat those giant breasts. No, heh heh, there's nothing I can do… Wait, why am I crying in my heart?

At any rate, she had solved a mystery. And as she pondered her inadequacy in combat, she considered attaching ingot weights to her chest when training.

"_____"

No! she shouted in her heart.

She was not here to praise giant breasts. She was here so Asama could confess to her, but she was clearly being swallowed up by that opponent.

She was the defensive type. Even if she tended to be on the receiving end, she had never expected for an attack to make it this far.

She wanted to put some distance between them, allowing her to

take the initiative, so she acted on reflex.

“W-wait, Tomo!”

She grabbed Asama in order to push her away.

Her hands pushed from below at the obstacles in front of her eyes.

…Eh?

Her fingers seemed to sink into them.

…Ehhhhhhhhhhh!?

She remembered her mother being the same. That woman’s body had felt dense and contained a springiness that pushed back, but Asama did not push back and the obstacles only transformed further the more Mitotsudaira pushed.

The term “shock-absorbing boob armor” came to mind, but she was not sure what to make of that.

At any rate, she focused on pushing Asama away and gathered her strength. When she did, a tremor ran through Asama’s body.

“Ahn.”

Asama reflexively pulled her thighs and hips back.

Before Mitotsudaira could even feel surprised, Asama’s forehead pressed down on her own.

The other girl’s gently arched body was leaning forward, making it hard to push her back, but Mitotsudaira started worrying about the fact that it looked like she was fondling Asama’s breasts.

Wait. Did I just unlock the path to being a breast sommelier? wondered Mitotsudaira, but then she remembered her original objective.

…W-wasn’t I supposed to be rejecting Tomo’s confession!?

The age was clearly heading in the opposite direction here. Asama arched her back even further in order to escape, but due to gravity, the weights hung down from her body and Mitotsudaira found herself supporting the falling breasts in her hands.

…Oh, I think some ancient view of the universe says the gods support mother earth's weight from below. Maybe this is what that meant…

But what was she to do?

If Asama confessed now, the situation would prevent her from refusing.

This was likely one of the deepest gropings Asama had ever received and it was a rare experience for Mitotsudaira too. To use a technical term, this is what they called raising a major flag. Also…

“M-Mito…please don’t move your hands…”

…I’m not!

Asama was moving her own body which was transforming her shape inside Mitotsudaira’s motionless hands.

Most likely, Asama was trying to move away, but shaking her hips to pull back accomplished nothing because her balance was shifted too far forward. So in her mind…

…Sh-she thinks I’m actively groping her!?

If Mitotsudaira rejected the confession, Asama would have been groped for nothing. Mitotsudaira decided she needed to be prepared for the Asama Shrine to sue her for damages. But…

“Ah.”

Just as Asama let out a heated breath…

“Oh? I decided to stop by after finishing our match, but what are you two doing so early in the morning?”

Some black wings descended from the sky on their right.

Asama saw Naruze land in the schoolyard.

She was already looking their way, and…

“Good morning.”

As soon as she landed, blood erupted from her nose.

When they saw the non-fallen angel fall to her knees and collapse forward on the schoolyard, Asama and Mitotsudaira stopped moving.

A pool of blood was growing in the schoolyard, but when they saw Naruze's trembling hand drawing out a storyboard in midair, they were unsure whether to help her or ignore her.

At any rate, the situation seemed dangerous to Asama. Not only had Naruze seen them, but Naruze herself was turning this into a crime scene.

Also…

"T-Tomo."

Mitotsudaira was practically holding Asama, but she moved back as if slipping out from under Asama's body.

Asama responded by lifting her pulled-back hips and pulling back her torso.

"Mito."

Mitotsudaira looked up at her while blushing.

She then placed a hand in front of her chest and spoke.

"I-I feel bad saying this after what I just did, but…I cannot accept your request."

She rejected Asama.

Asama felt a sinking feeling inside her heart.

She was not quite sure what the first half of the rejection had meant, but it was unfortunate all the same.

…I should have known she couldn't.

Mitotsudaira was provisionally the second in line to ruling the Far

East, a Rank 1 Musashi Knight, and the owner of a company. As the daughter of the Asama Shrine, Asama understood how one's position affected their decisions.

With that in mind, Mitotsudaira was taking her position seriously and Asama may have been taking hers too lightly.

Hmm, she thought while feeling like the heat from the night before was cooling. But…

"Ah."

She realized Naruze was no longer moving.

"A-are you okay, Naruze!?"

She ran over, flipped the girl onto her back, and found the non-fallen angel covered in her own blood with a happy, open-eyed smile on her face. *Wow…* thought Asama as she nearly flipped her back over, but ended up leaving the girl on her side so she could breathe. Wings could be quite heavy, so trying to carry her could damage the wings.

"So leaving her would be best."

"No, how about we call Naito? She's the expert."

Asama sent a divine transmission message to Naito.

"Um, Naito? It's Asama. Naruze flew down, landed, got an explosive nose bleed, and finished herself off. Is this some kind of disease? What should we do?"

"Ohhh. After last night, she wanted to get all fired up, so she ate a bunch of chicken hearts and livers at the grilled chicken place. That probably came back to bite her."

Asama wondered if that was similar to cannibalism, but that may have been what had caused this. However, the barely conscious Naruze began weakly singing a lyrical song with the same expression as before.

“I think she’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure her life isn’t flashing before her eyes?” asked Mitotsudaira.

“Oh, I’ll grab a spare uniform and be right there,” said Naito. “Just a minute, okay?”

“Sure, sure,” replied Asama while placing a small tamagushi near Naruze to protect her. A small torii-style sign frame appeared from the top, so she set it to tune the area and protect the indicated individual’s health before twisting the sign frame to turn it on.

Something like a thin mist covered a three meter area around Naruze. That indicated the ether tuning was underway.

She wondered whether she should just leave the girl there, but…

“Um.”

She had forgotten why she was here in the first place.

She faced Mitotsudaira again and looked the silver wolf in her somewhat wavering golden eyes.

“Mito, sorry about all this.”

“Don’t be. That last part was pretty incredible, but I don’t mind. I have my own position, but I do think under different circumstances I might have accepted your request.”

Asama was thankful for the girl’s kindness, but she doubted Mitotsudaira would accept even if she asked again.

…I guess I can do it with Kimi or even alone…

She eliminated that thought from her mind.

She was facing Mitotsudaira right now, so her own issues could wait.

She gave a deep bow.

“I am truly sorry. I got all worked up without thinking about what you would want.”

“No, um,” began Mitotsudaira. “I really do think I would have agreed if I had a more comfortable position.”

Asama was glad to hear it, but she also knew that meant there was no chance. Reality was cruel and that was all there was to it, so Asama raised her head with a smile.

“I really am sorry. …I guess it was a little sudden to ask you to form a band with me.”

…That’s the first I’ve heard of that!!!

Mitotsudaira mentally leaned back so far she nearly fell over.

…What’s this about a band!?

Wasn’t this a confession scene?

Wasn’t that why she had groped…no, supported her breasts and why the two of them had been surrounded by such a strange atmosphere?

But now that she thought about it, Asama had never actually told her why they were meeting up this morning.

…Oh, maybe I’m just an idiot.

She had jumped to the wrong conclusion.

But what was this about forming a band?

She understood what that meant, but she was puzzled that the idea had come from Asama and that she was being invited.

It was not that she had no interest in music. In fact, she had an understanding of and skill at music. Her father had enjoyed strings music, he had taught her to play, and she had danced with her

mother.

Due to her mother's divine protection as a werewolf, the woman's energy had infected her and her father as well. And her mother had likely enjoyed the feedback from the other two. Her mother had sometimes spoken in Mitotsudaira's juvenile speech patterns and Mitotsudaira had sometimes heard her mother using baby talk in her parents' room at night.

"Heh heh. How do you wike dat~? Do you want it wike dis~? Or maybe wike dis~? Since you're giving it a real effort, I might just stop if you can hold it in for ten more times~. Oh, dear. You need to be more honest with yourself~. One~, two~. …Heh heh. Don't worry~. Even if you can't hold it in, I'll help you get nice and big again~. Now, let's keep going wike dis~. Three~, three-point-one~."

She had also heard long, shrill cries and sobs from her father, but now that she thought about it, that was something else entirely.

She belatedly discovered a new truth there.

…That really was the worst home for a proper upbringing.

At any rate, what was going on?

Asama had only ever shown an interest in Gagaku and even then only with a highly Shinto focus, so she had completely ignored pop music and Western music.

Mitotsudaira did not know why she had suddenly thought to form a band, but setting the reason aside…

…With Tomo, that might not be so bad.

Mitotsudaira was a Rank 1 Musashi Knight, so she had her own position in society.

While she did not know what had led Asama to try to form a band, she did understand why the girl would be hesitant to do so on her own.

Asama may have been worried that it clashed with her shtick.

They were in the second year of high school and were effectively mid-level members of the Far East's students. They had to take things seriously, but they also had a lot more options now.

In that case, thought Mitotsudaira.

"Um."

She wanted to take back what she said. Even if she was not going to explain that she had mistakenly thought Asama was confessing to her, she wanted to join that band.

Part of it was wanting a hobby, but she also wanted to be able to work with her friends toward something she could not do on her own.

So she spoke to Asama who was beginning to turn her back.

"Tomo…"

Just as she was going to tell the girl to wait, she heard a bark from the hair behind her.

The Cerberus must have fallen from her head when Asama's forehead had pressed down on Mitotsudaira's, so the three-headed wolf was caught between the two backmost rolls of hair. But…

"…!"

That bark of warning was followed by a sudden figure appearing beyond Asama who had turned her back.

…Naito!?

No.

What she had thought was Naito's wings was actually hair. It was someone else who had nimbly jumped down from the bridge.

"…Kimi!?"

Kimi saw herself as a diligent girl.

She always set her goals for the day first thing in the morning and made sure to follow that plan. And today…

…I must reject anything and everything!

The night before, she had learned that her brother was interested in a certain girl. She had contacted that girl and had settled things inside herself, but she still wanted to enjoy and indulge in the expected role of an elder sister.

She would probably start thinking about all of this again if her brother took more serious action in this regard, but she would not be thinking about herself as much as she would be thinking about watching over, supporting, and if it came to it, being a place of solace for that nearby individual who she could almost call another version of herself.

To do that, she had decided this morning to do everything she could now.

She knew what she needed to do. She had to play the “selfish sister” when faced with this sudden turn of events. And she was going to play that role here.

“Stop! You mustn’t confess!”

She grabbed Asama’s hands and pressed them firmly against her own chest.

“Ahhhn. St-stop it, Asama! If you come at me that strongly, I won’t be able to resist!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but is your brain even working!? Oh, it isn’t, is it!? Is it!? That’s the answer, isn’t it!?”

Asama blushed and pulled her hands away. When the girl stepped away, Kimi grabbed Mitotsudaira’s hand and pressed it against her chest too.

“Ah, ahhh! You too, Mitotsudaira!? Did you fall for my charm!? You did, didn’t you!? That’s why you tried to confess to me, isn’t it!? But you can’t! I’m the type that practices self love through cell division!”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of this, even if this misunderstanding sounds rather familiar!”

The Cerberus barked in agreement, so it seemed to know who its master was.

“Now, then.” Kimi let go of Mitotsudaira’s hand, faced Asama, crossed her arms, and tapped her right heel against the ground. “So? Why did you call me here this early in the morning, Asama?”

“Well, it’s a bit of a complicated issue…”

Asama raised her eyebrows a little, but her shoulders soon relaxed and she waved her right hand with an understanding smile on her lips.

“Um, you don’t need to think about it too seriously. When I asked Mito, she immediately rejected me. So no pressure.”

This is getting heavy, thought Kimi with a silent sigh. When Asama forced a smile like this, it was always something quite heavy and always something related to her herself. So…

“What is it?”

“Well,” said Asama with an empty smile. “Do you want to form a band?”

“With who?”

“Just you and me.”

“U-um,” said Mitotsudaira behind Asama, but Kimi ignored her.

Kimi was focused on a certain fact.

…I see.

It was true of her brother and while it may not have been true of everyone…

…*People really do change.*

Mitotsudaira heard Kimi speak with her back turned.

“No…”

It was a rejection.

She was refusing Asama’s request.

“…”

Asama’s smile briefly lost all strength, but…

“I had a feeling…”

Still smiling, Asama gave a skillful sigh and shook her hands a little.

“Oh, um, then forget what I just said. Don’t pretend you didn’t hear me. Pretend I didn’t say it in the first place.”

“A-are you sure?”

Asama turned her smile toward Mitotsudaira’s question.

“Well,” she began while thinking. “I guess I don’t want to start something like that when I’m so out of my element.”

Mitotsudaira knew what she meant, but then she heard a new sigh.

It came from Kimi. She put her hands on her hips and gave a disappointed sigh.

“Don’t be silly. …Your obvious disappointment shows just how much you wanted to do this, Asama. If it weren’t for that, I would be telling you to do it on your own,” she said. “But today, I have no right to attack you for that.”

“Eh? What do you mean, Kimi?”

“Judge. It’s simple. …I too need to do things on my own if I want to do this right.”

In other words…

“I was making a quick test to see if I could live on my own, but here I am about to rely on my friends. Of course, I have no idea if pushing you away would be the right thing or the self indulgent thing to do.”

“On your own?”

Asama tilted her head and voiced the doubt in her mind.

“But don’t you have Toori-kun?”

“Judge.” Kimi nodded, shook her hair, placed a hand on her cheek, and crumbled to the ground. “My foolish brother is trying to win over another girl!”

…A girl!?

Asama did not know how to react to Kimi’s words.

She had known Toori for a long time, but he had apparently found a girl he was interested in. This was the idiot who enjoyed porn games, did not hesitate to stare at a girl’s butt or breasts, and would head to the health examination in the nude if it was being administered by a female doctor. He and his idiot sister were like family to her, but…

…Sigh…

I guess “is that so?” is all I can say for now. It makes me wonder why he’s being so distant with me, but maybe that means I don’t understand the situation.

To sum up…

“I have difficulty imagining that.”

How did he act when he went to meet and speak with this girl?

It was less that she could not imagine it at all, but it only raised further questions when she imagined him using his perverted arts to stare at her butt and breasts.

But how was she supposed to respond?

For one thing, she did not know if Kimi’s mood was a sign of her unease or just her usual craziness.

“Um, Kimi?”

“What!? What is it, Asama!? Now, leap into this sister’s chest which is about to burst with a ‘snap!’ or ‘pop!’ sound effect due to all the pain of being abandoned by her brother!”

“I really have no idea what you’re talking about, but…”

Just as she was going to ask who the girl was, she sensed a sound.

It was a rumbling.

A solid strength was fired down from directly above, shaking both the schoolyard and the bridge.

…*Oh.*

Just as she realized things had spread in a dangerous direction, Asama looked to the person standing beyond Kimi.

That person had stomped the schoolyard in displeasure.

“Mito, do you have something to say?”

“No! …Nothing!”

Mitotsudaira realized her eyes had narrowed sharply.

I'm getting pretty worked up, she objectively noted, but she was also unable to stop what she had been holding inside.

This was a fairly dangerous situation.

She felt bad when the Cerberus restlessly looked up at her face, but…

…*Kh.*

Part of her was on the verge of tears.

"My king…"

During a certain incident in middle school, she and him had promised to be knight and king. Afterwards (and with some urging from her family back in Hexagone Française), she had started showing up at meetings for the Musashi's Knights League and had become a Rank 1 Knight as a student.

She was one of Musashi's knights, but if she was to say *whose* knight she was, he was the only answer.

And if she ignored Kimi because she was his sister and Asama because she was "like family" and in charge of his spell contract, she thought of herself as having the closest defined relationship with him.

While Kimi and Asama outdid her in their official positions, she thought of herself as the first to enter into a relationship with him outside of the necessary things like family or contracts.

It was not an issue of likes and dislikes or of love and hate. It was the trust between master and servant that she viewed as surpassing such things. No matter what happened, they would walk together toward the same goal. That was the trust between master and servant.

However…

…*A girl!?*

Needless to say, a romantic relationship was different from the trust between master and servant. There was nothing wrong with both types of relationships coexisting.

But that was only from a logical perspective and she did not know if he would begin mixing those things.

And if he was distracted by romance…

…*Will he forget about our promise?*

He had already been ignoring her a lot since they had entered high school.

"Maybe, *she thought.* This is what it is like to be a knight serving a king who is infatuated with his queen.

But…

"Are you certain, Kimi?"

She wanted to avoid any unilateral doubts. She nearly shifted into serious mode, but Kimi…

"Judge. I am! If I was a dog, I'd spin around thrice!! Now, spin and bark! You want to bark for attention, don't you? Don't you? Hey, hey. Don't you, Mitotsduairaaaan?"

"Now I think I'm getting serious in a different way!"

Then Mitotsudaira and Asama asked the same question.

"What is going on?"

And as if to finish the question…

"What do you mean?"

Kimi's eyes raced toward the school building to check on the time.

It was still shortly after six. The athletic teams would begin their

morning practice soon, but she and the other girls would not be in their way quite yet. Naruze was lying in a pile of blood on the schoolyard while occasionally convulsing, but it was Naruze. She had probably found a new way to have fun. Kimi would only address that when she wanted to have some fun as well.

But at the moment, she stood between Mitotsudaira and Asama.

…Asama's case is much more serious.

Mitotsudaira had her king and knight relationship with Kimi's brother, so she would use that to interpret the boy's new life.

But Asama had nothing like that. Or rather, she had a lot like that, but she was not aware of it. The girl was currently tilting her head in thought.

"Hm. When did Toori-kun end up like this?"

Her comments were naturally rubbing Mitotsudaira the wrong way, but Asama did not understand any of it.

She did not understand what was happening, so she was trying to view Kimi's brother as someone incomprehensible. She was trying to escape this safely instead of trying to understand it.

…What a troublesome girl.

If she wanted to look smart, she could always look at it as something other than emotion.

Kimi was also confused, so she wondered if she was only viewing it so calmly because her own symptoms were not as strong.

I see, she thought while looking to Asama and then Mitotsudaira.

"There is a way of healing all of our illnesses someday."

"Eh?"

Answering their question here would be meaningless. That "treatment" would only be possible if a lot of unlikely events

occurred and a lot of people other than her did all the right things. And…

“That would mean picking a fight with the entire world and making the impossible possible.”

“What?”

Asama and Mitotsudaira’s question brought a thought to Kimi’s mind.

…*Interesting.*

She did not know her own destiny and she of course did not know her friends’ destinies either. But…

“Don’t you think it would be interesting if our reality suddenly changed one day?” she asked. “What if something you thought was impossible, or that you never realized might actually be possible, suddenly happened and all our dreams came true? Do you think that could happen?”

“Of course not. That’s impossible…”

After saying that, Mitotsudaira realized something and Asama put it to words.

“Making the impossible possible… Kimi, can you see a future that holds a method we haven’t even thought of?”

“No, I can’t. But I think it could happen. It isn’t a situation; it’s a development. It isn’t a board set up for us; it’s a place we only arrive after working together to overturn that board. But…”

But…

“It isn’t like me to work hard toward something like that. Still, whether you want it or not, when you approach that place, you will find a dancer pulling you forward. You can think of it like that.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, when have we ever understood what Kimi’s talking about?”

“That’s fine,” said Kimi as she patted their shoulders.

…What should I do?

Should she hope for *that*?

She thought it would be interesting if *that happened.*

But her goal for today was to reject everything, so…

“You’ll have to convince me to do it.”

Mitotsudaira would not be a problem. She had settled on who she wanted to be and was almost scarily easy to tease.

…So I can get her involved without a problem.

“Asama, Mitostudaira.”

“Wh-what?”

“What is it?”

While wondering why they were already on guard, Kimi took a step back.

She crossed her arms and puffed out her chest.

“To set everything up and to convince me…you will be going on a date with me today. Got that!?”

The first thing Mitotsudaira did after hearing Kimi was to pick up the Cerberus.

She could not accept this crazy person’s words at face value.

Yes, that might have been a direct hit, but I am a knight, second in line to the Far East, and Extra Special Duty Officer of the Chancellor’s Officers, so…

…A date?

That was normally what a boy and a girl in a romantic relationship would do. It was generally done during the day. They would shop around town, see a play, get something to eat, and in some cases share the bedroom afterwards.

In other words, a date was meant to establish or strengthen a relationship. And a romantic one at that.

"…Eh?"

Could it be? she wondered with three possibilities in mind.

First, since her brother was trying to establish a romantic relationship with someone else, Kimi had gone crazy like usual and wanted to acquire the same thing here to compete with him.

Two, Kimi was treating them as targets of romance in order to give them someone onto whom they could release their anger over her brother's actions.

And third…

…She's simply gone insane.

That last one seemed the most likely, but if so, she could not let herself get involved.

She had already slipped away from common sense with Asama and made an unnecessary misunderstanding. The band invitation had somehow become a confession between girls. And…

"Um, Mito?"

"Wh-what?"

"You look like you're trying to hold back from some marking, but are you okay?"

"I am doing nothing of the sort!!"

That misunderstanding had not been cleared up, but the idiot sister was quick to latch onto it.

“That’s perfect! Let’s go on a date, Mitotsudaira!”

“I really don’t see the connection.”

“Who cares!? Asama has been growing and floating things in the spring lately, so we’ll have plenty of equipment for marking! If possible, do it where I can see you!”

“Stop shouting utter lies so loudly!”

The idiot sister danced out of the way. She then spun back into place and pointed at Asama with both hands.

“That settles it!”

“We haven’t settled anything!” shouted Mitotsudaira.

However, someone had a different opinion: Asama. She clasped her hands and blushed.

“I-if I satisfy you, you’ll form a band with me, Kimi!?”

“Of course. But that’s a tall hurdle.”

The dancing crazy person readily agreed to those terms.

Mitotsudaira was confused and felt left out in a number of ways.

…What am I supposed to do about the band issue?

She wanted to take part, but she had ended up refusing already. She could always say it was a misunderstanding, but she would be unable to answer if she was asked what misunderstanding she had made. But…

“Heh heh. Mitotsudaira, you can join us too.”

“I-I do not need your help!”

Mitotsudaira was frightened by her own stubbornness. *Sometimes*

pride only makes things worse, she thought. *But I guess this is over now…*

Asama turned her blushing face Mitotsudaira's way.

"Mito, I just have to satisfy you too, don't I!?"

Naito flew down from the sky holding a Magie Figur with "Recording" written on it. Mitotsudaira had a feeling some incredible danger awaited her in the future, but…

"Th-that is fine with me!"

She did not want to let this last chance slip from her fingers and she tried to make sure Naito could not hear as she avoided mentioning the band directly.

"You had better satisfy us both today! For the sake of our future!"

"Torii-chan, are you satisfied with that? You're probably on your way back from morning practice, so you can eat more. It'll make me more money too."

A woman's voice filled a wooden space. It was the Blue Thunder café/bakery.

At the counter in front of the table, someone sat in the seat by the window while typing at a sign frame with one hand and munching on a rice ball with the other.

"Torii Motonaga. That's an inherited name, so you can live a more exciting life, you know?"

The manager placed a cup of tea in front of Torii and the girl raised a hand in appreciation.

"Thanks. But the name is really only something I got for being the Chancellor and Student Council President, so I try not to think much about that kind of thing."

“But you’re the second generation of your family with the Torii name, right?”

“Well, I thought that would make it easier to inherit,” she said. “More importantly, where’s Toori?”

“Oh, he came by last night and bought a bunch of bread to hand out to people, so he won’t be here this morning.”

The manager looked back over her shoulder where a silver-haired automaton stood at the counter.

Torii fixed the chest of her uniform that she had modified into a bustier.

“How are you doing, P-01s?”

“Judge, I am functioning well. I excreted quite a bit this morning.”

“You have no problem saying those things, but they’re really hard to reply to, you know?”

“Calm down.” The automaton held out a hand to stop her. “Where are Suga-sama, Nabe-sama, and Oo-sama?”

“Took me a second to realize that last one was Ookubo.”

Torii drank some tea and looked down at a yellow mass. It was an omelet, but…

“This looks fully cooked, but I see it has something mixed in.”

“You’ll notice once you eat it, but the contents are distributed evenly throughout,” said the manager.

“I see,” said Torii.

She grabbed the salt and pepper from the seasonings and held both between the fingers of her right hand. She roughly shook the two bottles with quick snaps of her wrist.

“Ookubo is probably out for some morning training with the

Chancellor's Officers. Suga is probably asleep and Nabe will either be gathering information or giving a report at the provisional council building. That's generally how it is on Wednesdays."

"Generally?"

"Do you not like things to be inexact, P-01s?"

"I have difficulty grasping the extent of the terms. Rather than 'not liking' them, I have determined I am unskilled at them."

"Judge. You should tell Toori that."

"Toori?"

Torii looked over at the manager, but the woman only smiled bitterly.

Torii sighed and looked up at the tall ceiling.

"It's fine being unskilled at it, P-01s."

"Is it?"

"That means you aren't the best at it, but you don't dislike it."

"…Deep. That is deep, Torii-sama."

"Well you're the one that said it. But maybe it is."

When Torii saw the automaton crossing her arms and nodding, she brought her fork to the omelet. She stuck the fork inside without hesitation and observed what it was like inside.

Just as the manager had said, the cooked egg split apart and revealed steaming vegetables.

Torii smiled a little and spoke.

"P-01s."

"What is it?"

“Is this an omelet?”

When P-01s replied “judge”, Torii groaned in thought.

“Hmm. If anything, I’d say it’s more like a Tres Españan tortilla.”

“Unfortunately, a tortilla would have more oil and be harder.”

“How much harder?”

“Wait just a moment,” said P-01s with a hand held out.

She approached the counter and held out her hands as if she were holding a board.

“Hnn!”

She mimed breaking the board over her raised knee and continued until her hands clapped together.

“That hard.”

“That was helpful for me, but I’m not sure the people who are going to eat it would like that.”

Torii smiled bitterly and took a bite of the soft, warm mass on her fork. She breathed just once to ventilate her cheeks, and…

“Amazing. How can you make it so even throughout?”

“That is strange, isn’t it?”

“You don’t know?”

“I suppose I actually do.”

“In what way?”

“If I might fail otherwise, then I might as well do it like this.”

“I see.” Torii nodded, looked to the manager, and finally continued. “There’s a lot I’d like to say, but I think I’ll leave that to the others.”

“The others?”

“Judge. Those who don’t decide what the flavor is in advance.”

In other words…

“Those who won’t judge you solely on your appearance and will actually approach you, unskilled automaton.”

Chapter 5: Socializer at a Place of Learning

What in the world

Are they doing?

Point Allocation (Spreading Flames)

Adele sat in the second seat from the front in Class 2-Plum's classroom.

That was near their teacher, Oriotorai, but Masazumi sat in front of her because she understood Adele's nature as a vassal would distract her from the lesson if the teacher looked her in the eye.

The seats in front of the teacher's desk were filled by Itoken and Nenji on the left and Shirojiro and Heidi on the right.

The manly slime and cheerful incubus acted as a buffer between her and the teacher's desk. They would promptly answer the teacher's questions and they used their proximity to the teacher to pass on the atmosphere of the lesson to the others. And if Suzu was ever silently overwhelmed by the awful classmates who had a tendency to go a little overboard, those two would restrain everyone with gestures and warnings devoid of ill will or harshness.

From her position by the window, Adele could diligently accept the lesson thanks to them. She would sometimes feel sleepy from the sun coming in through the window, but…

…*Everyone behind me seems kind of noisy today.*

She glanced back and found Rank 1 Musashi Knight Mitotsudaira.

That female knight could be seen as Adele's boss. That may have been why she had always been seated nearby Adele.

Adele appreciated that consideration.

As a vassal, she would be placed under Mitotsudaira's command in an emergency. If none of the Chancellor's Officers were present, she only needed to act as Mitotsudaira's assistant, so it made her duty nice and simple.

They got along and Mitotsudaira tried to look after her. Adele used her speed to charge at the enemy while Mitotsudaira took on a

defensive role, so their strong points fit together quite well in combat.

…I really am in a blessed environment.

Most of the vassals in the same or lower years had no interactions with the knights. During emergencies and group training, those vassals would be given a knight to follow for the time being, but when they could not work together well, that relationship tended to fall apart.

A vassal was meant to pave the way for, protect, and assist their knight. When a knight lost, responsibility fell on the vassal first and foremost.

Adele knew that Mitotsudaira had been more of a lone wolf in the past. She looked pretty much the same as she had back then, though.

…Oh, but that isn't a reference to her breasts. Yes, it just means that she went wild without wearing anything flashy.

Adele had known her for a long time, so during that first half of middle school, responsibility had often fallen on her as Mitotsudaira's vassal. Then again, that was mostly people asking her to stop the half-werewolf since Mitotsudaira had prided herself in never losing.

"Don't ask the impossible…"

She had been able to scratch her head, smile, and say that, so it had not been much of an issue. Mitotsudaira had occasionally spoken with her and Asama and she had always said the same thing: Thank you for all your help.

It had been a little much to write off as a "rebellious phase", but it had definitely been an "angry phase".

Compared to back then…

"…?"

Today, Mitotsudaira was especially active. Kimi was sitting next to her, Asama had slid her seat over, and the three of them were having some kind of strategy meeting in the middle of class. As for what they were strategizing for…

“Um… What is this date I keep hearing you three talking about?”

“Heh heh heh. You want to know, Adele? You do, don’t you!? If you want me to tell you, then spin around five times and say woof. … Five!! I win! You’re disappointed you didn’t get to become a dog, aren’t you!? If you want to try again, then go for it!”

Kimi’s engine was revved up hopelessly high.

They had a map opened in a sign frame and they were drawing lines along it with their fingers. Adele had a thought as she looked back to Mitotsudaira.

…Back then, I never would have thought we would have such peaceful times.

Asama’s thoughts were racing.

…A-a date!

She had to entertain Kimi and Mitotsudaira, satisfy them, and pull them toward her side. But she was well aware that she was strict with herself and very Shinto-focused. So…

…I don’t know how to take someone on a date! I’m done for! It’s already over!

But she did know that a date was about escorting someone.

In this case, that was Kimi and Mitotsudaira.

It was strange to ask them how she should entertain them, but…

“So what should we do after leaving the academy this afternoon? Should we go take a quick break somewhere?” she asked.

“Heh heh. I wanted to suggest karaoke, but then we would be stuck on the band topic. How about visiting a shop people are talking about?”

“Do you know a good place, Kimi?” asked Mitotsudaira.

“Judge. In Tama’s underground, there is a K.P.A. Italia gelato shop called The 31st Chamber of Ice Cream.”

“That shop was introduced in Aun-Aun recently, so it has long lines now.”

“Heh heh. I wasn’t finished, Mitotsudaira. You know Murayama’s central atrium park? A couple who trained with the wooden men of the 31st Chamber have opened a shop there. It’s called the Seventeen Articles of Ice Cream. It tastes pretty much the same and has some interesting curveballs, like yuzu and chili pepper flavor or mirin and mackerel flavor. The plum milk flavor has apparently been popular recently. …Oh, and I believe they have a thick milk stew flavor you would like, Mitotsudaira.”

Asama had trouble following the conversation. When she thought about it…

“Oh, I’ve never actually eaten any frozen treats like ice cream.”

When she raised her hand and made that confession, Naruze shot to her feet in the back row.

“W-wait a second, Asama! What are you saying!?”

She turned her crop mark frame Magie Figur around so Asama could see what she had drawn there.

“I *just* finished drawing you sucking on a popsicle while meaninglessly brushing up your hair! Stop creating plot holes!”

“How am I supposed to know what you’re making…?”

“You just don’t get it. I was about to continue the storyboard onto the ‘Oh, this Shinto popsicle doesn’t melt very easily, so it feels great when I stick it between my breasts’ scene so I could enjoy the

masochism of realizing I can draw this kind of thing so easily now! But you had to mess it all up!”

“It’s not like I can help it…”

Meanwhile, Mitotsudaira and Kimi exchanged a glance. After communicating through eye contact, Mitotsudaira spoke.

“Have you never had ice cream for religious reasons?”

“I see.” Urquiaga nodded from the back right of the classroom. “Thou shalt not eat ice cream! Religions regularly tell their musicians not to eat pork or beef or not to drink alcohol. It would not surprise me at all if Shinto bans ice cream. After all, they already drink alcohol. Add sweets on top of that, and you have a double whammy leading straight to diabetes.”

“No, we don’t have any rules like that. Shinto doesn’t ban any kind of food.”

Anything was clean once purified, so it was safe to eat. There were some foods the gods especially liked, but Shinto generally let people eat anything.

She had another reason for not eating ice cream.

“It just hasn’t been a part of my eating habits. And a while back-…”

A voice interrupted her from the right.

“That is unacceptable!!”

It was Ohiroshiki.

His family ran a well-known restaurant, he was part of the cooking club, he had started working with the farming club even though he was only in the second year, and he ran a food stand meant for the students. A third year representative of the club actually ran the business side of things, but Ohiroshiki seemed to take care of most everything on the scene.

Asama assumed he was going to give his opinion as a cook, but…

“Listen! Children love ice cream! So I too love it! Surely no one disagrees with that, right? But…oh, sorry. I got a little fired up there. Asama-kun, Mitotsudaira-kun, and Aoi Sister-kun, you are all older than ten, aren’t you? You old hags… Why are you all glaring at me? Anyway, I don’t care what you do since you are so far outside my strike zone. I shouldn’t have said anything. I apologize for interrupting.”

“I’m not entirely sure what you were talking about, but since I’m on the Public Morals Committee, I’ll report it to the guards, okay?”

This time, a voice reached them from the front of the classroom.

It was Adele who had been focusing on them for a while now. She had been looking up at them and quickly facing forward again whenever their eyes met, but now she looked back with her eyebrows raised.

“Don’t worry, Asama-san! Ice cream is a luxury! It’s something you almost never get to eat! Isn’t that right, Masazumi-san!?”

Adele turned to the transfer student from Mikawa who sat in front of her.

Honda Masazumi was a crossdressing girl. Her father was an influential member of the Provisional Council and she apparently hoped to be a politician as well. She spoke without turning back toward the others.

“Actually, my father buys it on occasion. It’s probably just the leftovers from an important guest, but he occasionally gives me some.”

“Ehhh!?” shouted Adele.

Nenji and Itoken turned her way.

“Keep fighting,” said Itoken with a serious expression.

“That’s right, Adele-dono. If we get serious, we can win ourselves a bright future.”

“That would be nice…”

She must have it tough, thought Asama.

…Now, what am I supposed to do?

Planning a date was not easy. She could tell the others why she had never had ice cream once they got there. With that decided, she asked about something else that bothered her.

“Kimi, Mito? How can you come up with these plans so easily?”

Asama heard Kimi speak.

“Well, I read a lot about it in magazines, but I’ve also had some practice with my foolish brother. …Right?”

She turned around to find him sleeping in the back row by the window.

He was not fast asleep, but his relaxed face was resting on his intersecting arms. He had likely tried to follow the lesson for a while because his textbook could be seen on the floor.

It was the usual scene.

When Kimi spotted the textbook, she picked it up and placed it on his sleeping head.

Asama heard everyone let out a quiet breath when they saw him like that.

She then turned to Mitotsudaira.

“Mito, do you read those magazines too?”

“Eh? Y-yes, judge. That would…yes, that’s it.”

I see, thought Asama. *Maybe I should try reading those too.*

But Kimi narrowed her eyes and poked at Mitotsudaira’s arm with

her elbow.

“Heh heh. …Going on imaginary dates, are we?”

“Wh-what are you talking about!? I-I just read the magazines is all!”

“Eh? Wh-what do you mean?” asked Asama.

Mitotsudaira frantically clasped and unclasped her hands.

“I-it’s not like I…imagine who it’s with…or, um…”

Her voice grew quieter as if she did not want the others to hear. The way she was acting and blushing clued Asama in.

…*Oh.*

While Kimi was taking her brother out on “dates”, Mitotsudaira could only imagine. She most likely did not have a set partner in mind, but…

“You imagine it would be with someone important to you, don’t you?”

“I-I, um…”

“I see.” Kimi nodded and glared at Mitotsudaira. “I notice the dates I’ve been on and the ones you were imagining are awfully similar…”

“Wh-what about it?”

Mitotsudaira’s voice grew even quieter than before.

“Heh heh. Wouldn’t that mean the ‘important person’ you were imagining…is a lot like the person I was with?”

Half in tears, Mitotsudaira grabbed at Kimi, but Kimi dodged out of the way. When her hand grabbed at empty air, the silver wolf created a fist of protest.

“Wh-why would you make a connection like that!?”

“Because it makes me happy.”

“Eh?”

Mitotsudaira was speechless.

Asama and Mitotsudaira both listened as Kimi opened her mouth to speak.

“If we all have similar tastes, it means we can all have fun together, doesn’t it?”

“But, um, I don’t really know much about dates…”

Hearing that, Kimi faced Asama.

“A date is simply when you enjoy your time together. …And in doing so, you can grow closer, increase the time you spend together, and gain a better understanding of what you can share.”

“But I think we know each other pretty well already.”

“Do we?” Kimi smiled. “There are some things you can’t understand specifically because you are so close to someone.”

Suzu listened to Asama and the others.

…*How nice.*

She did not actually know what a date was. She had never gone on one, but she did have some vague knowledge.

At home, her parents would often watch the divine television during meals. She could not see the image, but she could imagine most of what was going on from the sound. And if something was expressed too much through the image, she could ask her parents.

But during the date scenes on dramas, she generally ran into a difficult problem: her parents would fall silent.

But on occasion…

“When we were young…”

“Kids these days move so fast…”

The way they whispered about it, Suzu could only guess that adults did not approve of dates very much.

The other day, her parents had said the following during a scene when the music grew especially intense:

“How indecent…”

“He’s nearly biting at her.”

“Completely inappropriate…”

She had been incredibly curious what was happening but had been hesitant to ask.

…Will they be okay?

Would Asama, Kimi, or Mitotsudaira be biting someone?

And since Mitotsudaira had something like a small dog with her today, it might do the biting.

However, Asama seemed to be enjoying herself.

She had the day before too. There had been a slight trembling of unease in her voice then, but today it was trembling in anticipation.

It felt like she was heating up.

…Yes.

Even if they were doing something inappropriate, doing something indecent, or biting at someone…

…I hope they have fun.

The date plan they settled on was to start at Takao’s nature district,

take a break at Mount Takao, continue to Murayama via Oume, eat ice cream at the atrium park, take a bath at Suzu's bathhouse, and then figure out where to eat dinner.

Asama wanted to think of ways to entertain Kimi and Mitotsudaira along the way, but…

…I often go to Mount Takao for work.

It was connected to the Asama Shrine via an ether pathway. In the context of Musashi's ether supply, they were something like the landlord and the tenant.

Starting somewhere familiar was nice, but she had a feeling she would have difficulty getting out of her work mindset.

Will this work out? she wondered as class continued.

Finally, sixth period came to an end and the party began.

Chapter 6: Revealed Ones at a Place of Passage

What in the world

Are you doing?

Point Allocation (Over)

In Kimi's mind, *it* had begun from the moment they left the academy.

In Shinto, all things had a "staring point", so to set up that starting point appropriately, she stopped at the top of the bridge in front of the school building. Mitotsudaira responded in kind, but Asama had her eyes focused straight ahead and started on without the other two.

"Wait, wait. Hold it, Asama. Heh heh. Why are you in such a rush? We aren't going to run away, you know?"

"Eh!? Oh, r-right."

Asama looked back, blushed for no reason, and (for once) had difficulty speaking.

She was nervous.

She was supposedly used to being the center of attention thanks to the Shinto rituals she performed on a regular basis, but here she was tense and nearly flustered.

…*This is a valuable scene.*

Kimi felt the date was already paying off, but there was still plenty to go. *Maybe I should tease her a little,* she decided while beckoning Asama over.

Asama dashed back to her, and…

"C-c'mon! Let's hurry on to Oume!"

"Takao."

"Oh, r-right! To Takao! Takao is where Tengu live, so they specialize in Tengu masks! They have a mascot squadron called Takao Sentai Tengumen that wear Tengu masks on their faces and

crotches and lately they've been running around to protect the ship at night!"

"You need to bow down to Takao right this instant."

That said, Kimi understood why Asama was nervously rambling with her cheeks flushed.

The girl did not understand what a date was.

She wanted to make sure the other girls did not grow tired of her or feel disappointed in her, so she was desperately trying to fill the silence and show them as much as possible.

It may have been a common trap that beginners fell into.

…*My foolish brother is a lot easier to deal with on that front.*

After all, he would start by doing this:

"Hey."

Kimi grabbed Asama's hand.

She held it tight.

Asama's arms and shoulders jumped.

"Eh? Um, Kimi!?"

"Why are you so jumpy? This is a date, so we need to hold hands, don't we? C'mon, you take the other one, Mitotsudaira."

"Y-yes, th-that would be for the best."

Kimi was on the right and Mitotsudaira on the left.

With two different people holding her hands, Asama could not rush on ahead no matter how impatient she was. But just to be sure…

"Heh heh. I think I'll make myself feel more at home."

Kimi embraced Asama's arm.

Asama was just a little taller than her, so she could rest her cheek on Asama's shoulder when pressing against her like this. She tried it out.

…*Oh, this is even better than I thought.*

Asama supported her, perhaps because she had been trained by her Shinto dances and archery. Her arm was softer than Kimi's brother's, and…

"Asama…"

"Wh-what?"

"No gaining or losing any weight, okay? I can't let you lose this elasticity. I want it all to myself, so don't let any other than us and my foolish brother do this."

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about. And besides, I'm a shrine maiden."

"True. A matchmaker shrine maiden like you really would have a divine protection preventing anyone from touching you if they aren't close to you, so we wouldn't be able to do this if your heart wasn't letting us."

Kimi's Ootsubaki Uzume divine protection would not allow anyone who interrupted her dance to touch her, but Asama's Asama Sakuya variety protected her based on romance.

In other words…

"I can only embrace your arm and grope your breasts because of the romance between us."

"That is not why. Familial love and friendship also counts." Instead of removing Kimi, Asama just let her shoulders fall. "But with the Apocalypse approaching, there really have been more mysterious phenomena lately. As the Asama Shrine's #2, I do have a lot of defenses like that in place."

"Will Mitotsudaira's Troiko be okay?"

“My Troiko?”

Mitotsudaira tilted her head. Kimi replied when she saw the Cerberus on her head do the same.

“Since it has three heads, I was thinking of calling it Threeko, but since it’s ‘trois’ in French, I decided on Troiko.”

“Troiko? C-could you not give it weird names without even asking!?”

Mitotsudaira protested.

The Cerberus had followed a knight like her, so she did not like naming it like a dog.

…But Kimi loves that kind of thing.

She gave off a mature aura, but she did not hesitate to express her love for cute things. Suzu was often the victim there, but according to Naomasa, “kiddy” things were about enjoying childish things rather than being a child oneself.

…She’s completely indiscriminate there.

This was the same. At this rate, the Cerberus would sound like it was named after the “toro” used in sushi. Naming it after food was fine, but a three-headed wolf was not seafood. In order to protest, Mitotsudaira looked past Asama to Kimi.

“Um.”

But Asama’s obstacles blocked her view.

…Eh!? What is this!?

She knew what they were called. When holding Asama’s hand, she had been able to see the other side. When she raised her head, her vision moved above the obstacles and Asama turned to face her.

“What’s the matter, Mito?”

Mitotsudaira looked down.

She could see the top of the obstacles down below.

…There’s no way she can see her feet.

Looking down would not be enough.

What did she do when cutting her toenails or washing herself? It had to negatively affect her accuracy. They would also get in the way when wielding a weapon.

…Oh, so that’s why she uses the bow. And since it uses a spell bowstring, her body doesn’t get in the way.

To repeat her thoughts from that morning, those things had to be inconvenient and they had to reduce her options in quite a few areas of life. Saying giant breasts were a hindrance in daily life might sound lewd, but that girl had to be putting in a lot of effort that no one ever noticed.

“Mito?”

This was her friend, so Mitotsudaira decided not to say anything.

Instead, she placed a hand on the girl’s shoulder and made eye contact.

“…”

After giving her a look of understanding rather than sympathy, she looked to Kimi.

“Now, then.”

“W-wait, Mito!? What was that just now!?”

Putting it in words would reflexively do damage to Mitotsudaira herself, so she refrained from answering.

“Can I say something, Kimi?”

“Heh heh. What is it? Tell me. If you wish to praise me, you don’t need my permission. You need to be more honest. But I’m willing to listen for two whole seconds! Now, go for it, Mitotsudaira! C’mon! C’moooon! Hurry, hurry!! Still nothing!? I’m here! Right here!! Can’t you see me!? C’mon! Take a good look!!”

“Why do you have to go on and on like that?”

“And what am I supposed to do when I’m stuck between you two?”

After Mitotsudaira and Kimi placated Asama, Mitotsudaira looked back to Kimi.

“My Cerberus is supposed to be serving a knight, so I can’t let you give it a dog’s name!”

“C’mere, Troiko.”

Kimi called out to it and all three heads barked.

“Eh?” said Mitotsudaira as she tried to look up above her head.

“It said Troiko is fine.”

The Cerberus barked again at the name.

…W-wait! Um…!

The image in Mitotsudaira’s mind had the Cerberus briskly leading the way with its tail raised, but…

“Are you trying to make it do nothing but eat and sleep all day long!?”

“Don’t let the name influence your mental image that much.”

Kimi glared at her and she decided that might be right, but she still did not like the sound of that name.

“But, um, Troiko?”

The Cerberus must have thought she was calling its name because it barked.

After a pause…

“Can’t we give it a cooler name?”

“Troi-Man.”

“Something a little more manly.”

“Troi-Erection.”

That certainly made the Cerberus sound frightening, but Mitotsudaira was not about to be saying “erection” on a daily basis. And Asama would have a hard time with all the meters filling up. So…

“You aren’t thinking very much before you speak, are you!? You aren’t, are you!?”

“Then as a compromise between Troi-Man and Troi-Erection, we’ll go with Troiko.”

“That is not a compromise!!”

But the Cerberus barked again.

“I see.” Asama nodded and looked to Mitotsudaira.

“Um, Mito. I think we should respect what the Cerberus itself wants…”

“B-but what if it grows up to be toroi?[1] A Cerberus deserves a cooler name…”

The person who happened to be walking by reflexively struck a pose as he faced them. It was Neshinbara. He pushed up his glasses and held a hand in front of his face.

“How about something with lots of voiced consonants like Baldogoria or Darigadregga!? Those sound strong, don’t they!?”

The Cerberus did not react.

“Yes.” Mitotsudaira nodded. “But don’t you have something a little

more natural?”

“Then how about Unzen Fugen-Dake!?”

The Cerberus still did not react and Mitotsudaira sighed, but Neshinbara looked to the Cerberus on her head.

“Since Asama-kun isn’t purifying it, are you treating it like a type of local god or spirit?”

“Yes.” Asama nodded. “I think it was made by a ‘mold’ from the Kojima Peninsula. From what I can tell, it has mostly pure ether, so there’s no need to actively purify it away to nothingness.”

Mitotsudaira could sense the Cerberus bristling its fur after sensing danger in those words. She held up its back end to make sure it did not fall off her head.

“Is there some kind of problem if it’s a local god?”

“There are certain situations in which local gods make an appearance.”

Neshinbara summoned his Mouse named Michizane and opened a sign frame. It displayed a page from a local god thread on Musashi’s divine network.

“Most of the time, it’s to visit a festival, but there are other situations typical of local gods.”

“Such as?”

“To protect or greet someone, whether a local or a visitor. They’ll always appear when a visitor is lost or a higher god has arrived.”

This had nothing to do with higher gods, but the Musashi itself was a giant visitor. However…

“What about the Musashi is it here to help?”

“That I can’t tell you. But based on the standard situations for local gods, that Cerberus must be here to help with something or tell us

something. So…”

So…

“I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but this land’s local gods must have taken a liking to it. They sensed the premonition and created this physical form to bless you with some lively cheer.”

Neshinbara jotted down a description of the Cerberus’s appearance and turned his back.

“I still think a name with plenty of voiced consonants would be good.”

“Yes.” Kimi nodded. “That pretty much settles it for Troiko then.”

“No, it does not!!” shouted Mitotsudaira.

However, the Cerberus barked. Mitotsudaira snatched it from her head and held it in front of her eyes with her eyebrows raised.

“You’re okay with that!?”

“…!”

Three simultaneous barks clinched it, so she fell to her knees. But…

“Is Troiko safe with the divine protections you always have active, Asama?” asked Kimi.

While listening to Kimi’s question, Asama looked down at Mitotsudaira who had fallen to her knees. The Cerberus was looking up at her.

“My defenses will accept a local god mold. Unless we try to harm each other or clash in some other way, it should be fine.”

“Then Troiko is one of us for the time being.”

Kimi laughed and placed her chin on Asama’s right breast. Saying “stop that” and glaring at her did nothing to stop her. She embraced

Asama's right arm again and tilted her head to look at Mitotsudaira.

"Troiko."

"!"

"You seem to like Mitotsudaira, so if she comes up with a good name, you go with that, okay?"

"…!"

The Cerberus replied and Mitotsudaira looked up in confusion.

She quickly picked the Cerberus up from the ground.

"That bark. Kimi, can you speak with this thing!?"

"Speaking with animals is a fairly basic technique for Shinto shrine maidens, you know? Of course, mutual understanding is a high-level technique, so all I can do is convey some slight nuance and grasp its answer like I'm hearing things."

"Yes," agreed Asama.

In Shinto mythology, every god could converse with wild animals and fish. Transforming into birds or turning into a fish was a very Shinto thing.

In Europe, that sort of nature worship had been crushed by the spread of Tsirhc.

…But in Shinto, everything is equal before the gods.

So…

"Mito, if you sign a contract as a shrine maiden, you too can learn and level up in that kind of skill."

"Shrine maidens talk about levelling up? Also…"

Mitotsudaira wiped off the Cerberus's feet with a handkerchief before placing it back on her head.

“I converted to Shinto in middle school, but signing a shrine maiden contract would hinder me in battle. Shrine maidens generally aren’t allowed to proactively start a fight.”

It did not particularly matter whether she would actually have many options to fight on the Musashi.

She was a Rank 1 Knight and her provisional inherited name placed her second in line to ruling the Far East. Given her position, she had to be prepared for an emergency. But when she looked up toward the Cerberus on her head…

“Working part-time as a shrine maiden would make for a nice change of pace and I could buy a spell for conversing with small animals as payment, right?”

“Yes. That is a standard Shinto spell, so if it’s as payment for shrine maiden work, you can have the god give it to you or have it applied to you by a mid-level or higher shrine maiden like me.”

“Applied to me?”

Asama nodded.

“You can rent the power from the god for a few days or some other limited period of time. You bow at the shrine when you do part-time shrine maiden work, right? That’s when the god applies a shrine maiden’s authority for the period of your work shift. Similarly, you could get the ability to converse with small animals for as long as the Cerberus is with you.”

“I see…”

“Will you be working again today?”

“Eh?”

Mitotsudaira was caught off guard and she thought for a moment. After a while, she opened a sign frame and checked her schedule.

“Would tonight be okay?”

“Yes. Asakusa’s ley lines need tuning, so we’ll do that. Really, it’s just checking over them since everyone’s rehearsing for the Gagaku Festival there.” Asama held a hand out to Mitotsudaira. “I’ll mark you down for that shift. For now, um…”

“Our date!!”

Still clinging to Asama’s right arm, Kimi shook her body and shouted the words. Asama responded by grabbing Mitotsudaira’s outstretched hand.

She already knew where their first stop was.

“There’s a Buddhist power spot in Takao’s nature district that’s gotten popular lately.”

A female voice sounded below the white sky.

“Okay, we’ve finished our warmup exercises, so let’s get started. Musashi Student Vassal Unit, use this basic training to show me what you’ve learned over the past two weeks.”

The voice belonged to a black-haired girl with an assault spear on her back. On her left arm, she wore a blue armband with “Vice President Ookubo Tadayo” written in white.

Her voice filled a wide open place: the second schoolyard below Musashi Ariadust Academy.

It was located at the bottom of the long stairway extending from the academy. It and the third schoolyard located further below were used as training grounds for the sports teams, the Chancellor’s Officers, and other groups.

Currently, the second schoolyard’s port side was in use.

“Student vassal unit, create a defensive formation with your mobile shells! Then advance and withdraw!”

She opened a scoring sheet sign frame for the student vassals and

blew the whistle hanging from her neck.

“————————!”

The sound was not particularly high pitched, but it traveled a good distance and set several objects and people in motion.

The objects were two giant oblong defense barriers that came to life in the center of the second schoolyard. The people were the vassal unit that placed their few mobile shells out front.

There were more than twenty vassals. A few – mostly third years – had mobile shells, but the others were equipped with training armor. Except for one.

“Balfette! You’re in the second year, so why do you only have a track suit!?”

“I don’t have any money! None at all! Will you give me some, Tadayo-san!?”

“Not a single yen!!”

“Hooray! I got permission to use my track suit!”

Do they both have to be so blunt? wondered the others as they watched the second year vassal holding a lance in her track suit. But…

“Huh?”

The short track suit girl had been running in front of them before, but she was gone.

She was much further forward.

She was not taking especially long strides. The speed came from the timing of her steps. Still, those running legs brought her forward in the navy blue track suit known as Musashi Blue. She ran toward the two defense barriers standing in the second courtyard.

“Judge! Second Year Adele Balfette! I’m up first!”

With a muttered “oops” or “dammit”, the third years started running too. They were assisted by their mobile shells, but they could not match her initial speed.

The mobile shells started catching up by the third step, but the track suit girl had too much of a lead.

“…!”

Adele charged toward the oblong glowing torii on the right. She judged the number of remaining steps by eye and held her lance forward.

Just as she was going to hit, Tadayo spoke up with her arms crossed and her eyebrows raised.

“Ha ha. You need to be a little faster than that.”

The defense barrier moved. The one Adele was aiming for moved up and a little forward.

“Huhhh!?”

It dodged her attack as if jumping over her.

“Musashi” watched the scene from the large landing halfway up the stairs leading to the academy.

The two defense barriers she controlled were moving. She looked port while moving a barrier forward in a mountain-like trajectory over the charging vassal.

“I modeled that movement on the walking of a heavy god of war.”

Adele flew off her feet below the barrier representing the left leg.

She had not been hit by any kind of attack. She had simply self-destructed.

After running so quickly, the short vassal had tried to rotate her

entire body to attack, but she had not made it in time.

…It looked like her momentum knocked her from her feet, but…

A closer look showed something else.

Even if she was light, tripping like that was odd. A look at her chest was enough to know how light she was, but she was holding that lance.

So…

"Did she throw herself into a dive to avoid hitting the ground while still lowering her speed? Over."

Based on "Musashi's" memories, the motion was similar to the one a ninja made just before hitting the ground after jumping from an elevated location. The ninja would be spreading out their clothing to increase air resistance, so the vassal's flailing limbs may have been playing a similar role.

…That vassal belongs to Class 2-Plum and I believe a ninja of equal speed belongs to that same class.

Had she received some advice from that ninja?

…If so…

The students of Class 2-Plum were doing more than studying on their own and training with the organizations or groups they belonged to. They were also giving each other instructions.

Once she started thinking about it, "Musashi" realized the vassal was not the only one.

The same could be said of the Asama Shrine's heir, the Aoi siblings who had become much more troublesome of late, the ninja who she had recalled a moment before, and the merchant duo who were beginning to make a name for themselves within Musashi's Commerce and Industry Guild.

"Could it be…all of them? Over."

“Musashi” would occasionally look around within Musashi Ariadust Academy, so she replayed her memories of Class Plum from then.

…Is this…?

Statistically speaking, the students of Class Plum were constantly exchanging opinions on their techniques and qualifications or giving each other practical advice. It went beyond Oriotorai’s mock battles. They were doing it after school as well. The vassal who was rolling a little to stop her fall had gone running with Rank 1 Knight Mitotsudaira and some others that very morning.

In that case, was Class Plum as a whole exchanging advice and making up for each other’s weaknesses and problems? But…

“Why would they be doing that? Over.”

That question remained.

“Musashi” asked herself why the students of Class 2-Plum were performing their self-training as a group.

Doing so individually made sense. As students, they had to prepare for their future and they might find themselves unable to keep up with others.

People almost always trained as individuals when working toward and settling into a career. They might use school to undergo specialized training and lessons toward that end, but there was no reason to make up for each other’s deficiencies as that class was.

Looking at it that way led “Musashi” to a certain idea.

…Are they trying to accomplish something as a whole rather than as individuals?

That was not all that strange when looking at the world as a whole.

The academies of the world’s nations used their Student Council, Chancellor’s Officers, or the academy as a whole to manage their

politics and combat.

It was said “if you are not a student, you are not a person” because students ruled the nation, but that was only true of the nations that held provisional rule over the Far East.

Things were different from the Far East’s point of view.

After all, the Far East was at peace.

With the Logismoi Oplo distributed to the Testament Union nations by Mikawa and the approaching Apocalypse, there were problems, but wars were governed by the rules of the history recreation and the Musashi was a noncombatant ship. It could avoid a course that took it through a battlefield and no one would complain as long as it obeyed the rules of the provisional rule.

That allowed the people of Musashi to live peaceful lives.

None of them would think of combat or fighting as the whole of life.

The vassal unit’s combat training down below was on a much smaller scale than comparable training in other nations.

With the Chancellor’s Officers, knights, samurai, and ninja, there were some that trained in the fundamentals of various combat styles, but it generally ended at that.

Not very many would go beyond the fundamentals and learn the techniques needed to survive and achieve victory on the battlefield.

After all…

…I have determined that is due to the provisional rule.

All of the ruling nations wished to benefit from the Far East, so they could not afford to lose the Far East. That allowed the Far East to maintain its peace while running errands and acting as a bank for the other nations.

And thus no one in Musashi specialized in combat outside of the

knights and the Chancellor's Officers.

Even if they did undergo combat training, it was only useful to put down on a resume when entering Far Eastern society.

The title of "vassal" was no more than that to the vassals working so hard down below. Their effort would not make them knights. So…

"They only need to do 'good enough'. Over."

The vassal that had self-destructed at full speed hopped back to her feet in order to pursue the defense barrier that "Musashi" was moving. She raised her lance overhead with both hands, and…

"Here I go!"

"Hurry it up!!"

The student vassal unit – including the third years – was accepting of her grandstanding.

She stood out for doing more than "good enough".

Did the other vassals understand her stance?

Combat was unnecessary in the Far East and on the Musashi. Their peaceful days would continue.

"We are doing our best to ensure that. Over."

But as if to ignore all that work, some of them were training and helping each other improve.

"Musashi" had not been around them enough to know why they were doing so.

It was possible Sakai had realized something, but she had yet to do any research on her own and it would be pathetic to ask him as a shortcut.

But suddenly…

“Oh? The Rank 5s of the vassal unit are training today.”

A group of three approached from behind. It was Asama, Aoi, and Mitotsudaira that “Musashi” had thought of earlier.

They were holding hands as they walked somewhere.

Asama was a little disturbed by “Musashi’s” gaze.

…Ehh? I-I think she’s glaring at us.

“Musashi” was the captain automaton for all eight of the Musashi’s ships. Asama knew her through her work at the Asama Shrine and had even worked with her on reports and business affairs.

But why was the automaton giving her a look of suspicion?

She found an answer almost as soon as she started wondering.

…I have Kimi to my right and a Cerberus on Mito’s head to my left!

They were also holding hands, so she had to look like a strange person in the center. There was no doubt about it. Working to maintain order on the Musashi was one of “Musashi’s” duties, so of course she was suspicious.

…Kimi might be a lost cause with her long history of past offenses, but as the Shinto representative of the Asama Shrine, Mito’s Cerberus is cute-…no, I mean safe. There’s no problem there.

Also…

…I feel like “Musashi”-san is looking at all three of us.

She quietly asked about it.

“Did you do something, Kimi? Or did Toori-kun?”

“Heh heh. Leave it to the master detective Clever Aoi! …And no, I didn’t say Cleavage Aoi!”

“Maybe wait until someone actually thought you said that?”

“True.” Kimi nodded. “Asama, I happen to know the password to stop Musashi’s automatons from being suspicious.”

“You’re lying to me again, aren’t you?”

“What are you saying, Asama? Trust me, okay? Now, listen. It’s an equation: π 0 i M Sin. Now, read that backwards!”

“How about you do it?”

“Sign my oppai!!”[2]

Kimi shouted the answer with a smile, but then…

“I told you to say it, Asamaaaa!!!!”

“Nwaaah! You are the worst!”

However, the situation was already on the move. The students heading home from school and the vassal unit down below were looking at them with disturbed expressions of disbelief.

Naruze was spraying blood and falling from the sky on her way to the transport district, but that was nothing new. Asama just hoped it did not interfere with her work.

As for “Musashi” right in front of them…

…Ah, she’s really put up her guard!!

“Asama!” Kimi gave her an extremely serious look. “Calm down! No one’s at fault here!”

“Do you think whoever says that first is absolved of guilt!? You do, don’t you!?”

“What are you staying, you silly girl? I was only trying to cover for you.”

“Why you…!”

Asama tried to raise her left hand, but Mitotsudaira held it. The crazy person showed no sign of caring as she faced “Musashi”.

“Heh heh. Sorry about that, ‘Musashi’. Our Asama can be so careless.”

“Do not worry about it.”

“Musashi” tilted her head to adjust her thoughts and she fixed her apron.

“Where are you three going and what for? Over.”

Eh? thought Asama as she mentally tilted her head.

“Musashi” never asked things like that. For one, she could track them while they were on the surface or in the corridors.

If she was asking…

…She must be curious where we’re going next.

With the crazy person on her right and the Cerberus owner on her left, it did indeed look like they were going to cause some trouble, so Asama forced a smile.

“We’re on our way to Takao.”

“Are you three training as well? Over.”

“Eh?”

After nearly answering the question with a question, Asama quickly swallowed her words.

…Training?”

Takao was used for Buddhist training. Thanks to the history recreation of the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism, they would work with Shinto and the Asama Shrine supplied them with ether. The area was also used for walks, picnics, and dates, but if students

– one of them from the Asama Shrine – were going there…

…I guess you would think it's for training.

Lying would not help, so Asama told the truth.

"We're just going there to relax."

"The three of us are on a date together! Jealous, aren't you!?"

"Musashi" reacted to Kimi's words by looking to Asama, Mitotsudaira, and finally Kimi. Then she placed a hand on her forehead.

"This seems quite different from the concept of a 'date' in my head."

"What is a 'date' to you, 'Musashi'-san?"

All of the nearby boys on the way back from school held their breath and tensed up, but "Musashi" paid them no heed as she placed a finger on her chin.

"Using some spare time to visit a sunny part of the deck, stare into the sky, view the world without focusing on ether reactions, serve your partner some tea, and discuss things unrelated to your official duties. Over."

"I see." Mitotsudaira nodded and continued with a tone of comprehension. "In other words, what you always do with Principal Sakai."

"Musashi" gave Mitotsudaira a truly frightening look and the girl and her Cerberus began trembling and sweating. Asama urged them to calm down and looked back to "Musashi".

"Anyway, um, we're going on a date to relax a little. …The plan is to follow the towing belts around from Takao to Oume and then Murayama."

"To relax? Over."

Asama mentally tilted her head again.

…That was a question?

What had that automaton thought about their plans to relax?

It seemed like something an automaton would have difficulty understanding, but even they had to take some time to "relax" in order to optimize their memories. In that case…

"Is something the matter?"

Once Asama asked, "Musashi" finally lowered her head.

"I apologize. The captain should not be stopping a Musashi resident, especially one as important as you, Asama-sama. However, I have determined I would like to say something," said "Musashi". "I now understand that you are living busy enough lives to necessitate some time off to relax. I do not understand what that means, but I will support any possibilities within the Musashi. Over."

"Is that so…?"

Asama did not really understand, but it was true she was busy dealing with her awful classmates and other difficulties on a daily basis. And that busyness had grown lately with the Gagaku Festival coming up.

Kimi smiled and tugged on her arm.

"Heh heh. Then how about we get going? 'Musashi', you take care of Adele and the others' training, okay?"

"Judge. I will serve them some tea later so they too can take some time to relax. Over."

"Musashi" bowed and the Cerberus barked in response.

When Asama heard that, she realized Kimi was pulling her forward.

"W-wait, Kimi! I'm supposed to be escorting you!"

“Um, are you okay, Naruze-kun? I certainly didn’t expect you to fall unconscious from the sky with blood spraying everywhere.”’

Naruze got up and found herself in the transport district on the port side of Okutama. The afternoon rush had begun as cargo arrived from other ships and the lower floors.

“Nn…”

Outside a relay warehouse, she shook her somewhat empty-feeling head and looked around while sitting on a bench next to some vending machines.

The pedophile and the curry boy were there. Noriki walked past carrying some lumber, but she knew he had likely been guarding her until she came to. Also…

…*Ah.*

A white handkerchief had been laid out on the bench where her head had been resting.

It belonged to Margot. The girl had continued on with their work instead of worrying too much. Naruze would have felt like a burden otherwise, so she appreciated it. And…

“Ohiroshiki, did something happen while I was asleep?”

“Naito-kun received some kind of document from a representative of the delivery business. She said something about wanting to discuss it with you later.”

“Judge. So it was finally accepted.”

“What was?” asked Hassan.

Someone stopped her there.

“Hey.”

It was Noriki. He stopped and looked back over his shoulder.

“We mostly get it already, so you don’t have to tell us.”

“True.” Naruze nodded and looked him in the eye. “You never get entirely involved in our affairs, do you?”

“If you get it, you don’t have to say it.”

“If I think you want me to say it, shouldn’t I say it even if I get it?”

“Then don’t say it.” Noriki smiled a little. “All I can do is earn enough to pay for my siblings’ tuition.”

“Then you’ll be joining us eventually, won’t you?”

“Why would I?”

“Don’t be silly.” Naruze smiled bitterly. “You said that’s all you *can* do. If it was all you *should* do, then you would be stuck doing that forever. But when it’s all you *can* do, you’re freed from that once there’s more you can do, right? You’re definitely planning to join us once you can and once you’re done with this.”

“That’s just a play on words.”

“Well, I am a Technohexen.”

Naruze sighed and sat back on the bench.

“Why do guys love making everything more trouble than it has to be?”

“Wh-what are you saying!?” exclaimed Ohiroshiki. “I love simple things! I do!!”

“Pipe down, criminal.”

She ignored his protests, did not hesitate to blow her nose with the handkerchief, and checked the color of the drying blood. She then threw her legs forward and leaned her back against the warehouse’s wall.

…If Margot shared the document, I should be able to see it.

She opened a crop mark frame Magie Figur.

"…?"

All of a sudden, someone held a paper cup out to her from the side, so she looked to see who it was.

"Tenzou?"

"This is a treat from 'Musashi'-dono. There is enough for everyone."

The ninja then handed cups out to Ohiroshiki, Hassan, and Persona-kun who happened to be passing by.

…I'm such a troublesome person.

She had known all of them for a long time, but she did not feel very close to them. Perhaps that was because she had started living on her own pretty early. That had changed to "with a roommate", but that gave her a home beyond the class. She also had her position in the delivery business.

She would not go so far as to call herself independent, but she mostly saw the academy as a place to relax. And thanks to her personality, she had a tendency to build walls between herself and others.

…But I'm glad they don't exclude me because of it.

If they did, she would have no reason to be in the same class as them. Even if she was the one building the walls, if they did truly reject her, she would just fall back on her occupation. She would stop even showing up at the academy.

The ever-changing sense of belonging in the academy allowed for a change of pace just by being there, but…

"You all love looking after people, don't you?"

"That is not what I'm doing," insisted the ninja.

"I never said I was talking about you, Mr. Self-Conscious."

The Ninja groaned and clenched his right fist, but she enjoyed interpersonal relationships with that much tension to them.

Anyway, she thought while looking back to her Magie Figur.

…Edel Brocken's tester exam.

She was looking at the document granting them the qualifications to take the exam.

…We have the document, but that doesn't mean we have to take the exam.

This was just one path toward the future.

Edel Brocken was a company located somewhere in M.H.R.R. that developed equipment exclusively for Technohexen. Any licensed Technohexen who had reached a certain level would suddenly have an Edel Brocken pamphlet and passcode sent to them. If they ignored it, they would never have any dealings with Edel Brocken. If they registered, they would have occasional dealings with Edel Brocken, seemingly whenever the company felt like it.

Naruze had seen it once when the Musashi was traveling along the southwestern provisional border of M.H.R.R.

The reflection of the morning sun beyond the early morning clouds had revealed the shadow of a giant floating mountain resembling a three-cornered hat.

"That is Edel Brocken," Almirante, head of the individual delivery business, had told her.

Edel Brocken sought testers for its equipment, but they generally restricted themselves to one and occasionally two from a nation. They only needed a Weiss Hexen and a Schwarz Hexen after all.

The Far East already had a tester on the Musashi. That tester was a woman named Wild Kamelie, a Schwarz Hexen from M.H.R.R.

That took up the sole tester slot. The Far East had no Technohexen culture in the first place, so a tester for a standard *schale besen* was all they needed.

But a slight problem had been pointed out the year before.

Edel Brocken was apparently expanding their lineup of equipment to deal with the Thirty Years' War and the Apocalypse, so they were providing even the Musashi with two tester slots.

One entry in their lineup of next generation Technohexen equipment was apparently a cumulative equipment style of *schale besen* for both Weiss and Scharz Hexen.

It was rumored to be a high-speed and high-mobility model that required the combat Technohexen outfits that had been optional in the past. It was also rumored to have anti-warship capabilities.

"In that case, what are Musashi's Technohexen to do?"

Wild Kamelie already had the Schwarz Hexen position, so that left the Weiss Hexen position open.

That gave Naruze the advantage.

If she could take that position, she would be the leading Weiss Hexen on the Musashi. That would guarantee her current lifestyle for as long as she remained a tester and it would likely stabilize her position in the future as well.

It was worth taking the challenge. Simply trying would bring her name to the forefront. But…

…*Margot.*

The two of them were a Weiss and Schwarz Hexen pair.

They had only been so close for a few years, but their connection went back beyond that, they lived together, they worked together, and they spent their lives together. She was someone Naruze did not want to be parted from.

Of course, Margot would tell her not to worry about it if she said anything, so there was nothing to say. But…

…Am I spoiled if I want her to be the tester with me?

She had asked to let Margot see the paperwork too when it came in. If she became the tester, it would be a big change in both their lives.

What was she supposed to do?

Inviting Margot to the tester exam would be easy, but that would mean Margot had to take on Wild Kamelie.

Wild Kamelie had real combat experience in Eastern Europe and she was only in her late twenties. At that age, she had the best of both worlds as far as experience and physical strength were concerned.

Defeating her would be great, but losing to her would be the end of it all. That would demonstrate their difference in status and settle their position within the Musashi.

But Naruze also had to worry about passing her own tester exam.

It was a troublesome issue, so…

“I could always just not do it.”

“Not do what?”

The ninja looked over, so she smiled bitterly.

“A certain plan for the future.”

“For Musashi’s future?”

He isn’t getting that wrong on purpose, is he?” she wondered.

“Well, you could say it has to do with where we’re headed.”

She stood up from the bench, stretched, and spread her wings.

She drank down the tea in the paper cup, tossed it into the vending

machine trashcan, and looked to the others around her.

“If you all have work, get to it.”

“Judge. This was only a detour on the way.”

“That’s exactly the kind of distance I want from you.”

She smiled a little and took off. With a flap of her wings, she kicked off the warehouse wall and soared high into the sky.

“What do you call this?”

Her black wings took her into the white sky that was already filled with many of her colleagues.

“Is it courage or recklessness? I want to do this whichever it is. And the result will be the same either way.”

Chapter 7: Sweethearts at a Place of Wishes

CHAPTER 7
"Sweethearts at a Place of Wishes"
Ah.
My usual habits kicked in
And I went a little crazy...
Point Allocation (Can't Be Helped)

Ah.

My usual habits kicked in

And I went a little crazy…

Point Allocation (Can't Be Helped)

Asama was thinking.

…Now, this is supposed to be a date, but what are we supposed to do?

They were at Mt. Takao. It was called a mountain, but it was actually the nature district and sail on the back end of Takao, the third starboard ship. The main selling points were the small mountain in the nature district, the Buddhist temple, and the various training ground viewing points or self-prayer stations.

Takao was known as a power spot, so it was of course the major Buddhist location on the Musashi. The mountain monks would also gather there.

According to the Testament descriptions, Mt. Takao was managed by Ookubo Nagayasu, a Matsudaira retainer, and Asama had heard that the candidates to inherit the Ookubo name were training there.

…Isn't the daughter of the Ookubo family in the first year?

Because Ookubo Nagayasu managed Mt. Takao, rights to the name fell to Musashi rather than to Mikawa which had sent everyone away and given the names of all the major retainers to automatons. Partially because the Tadayo name had already been inherited by someone from Musashi, it was expected that someone else from Musashi would inherit Ookubo Nagayasu's name as well. But…

"Takao can't develop too much since its manager's name hasn't been inherited yet."

As the daughter of the Asama Shrine, she decided she needed to focus more on the area's ley line output and tuning management.

Even so, the area was well established.

Children played in the nature district's park and the mountain

monks were training in the artificial waterfall.

“Okay, today’s water has an impurity-exorcising spell, so a Buddha’s gonna appear and beat the crap out of all the impure people. I hope you’re ready.”

The water had stopped flowing over the bare-rock cliff and the mountain monks prepared themselves down below in front of a display that said “standby”. All of them held body pillows or porn game boxes with waterproof spell charms attached.

“All right! Bring it! I’ll resist this with my waifu!!”

“Yeah! Today we’ll prove that our genre-loving spirit has the justice needed to defeat even a Buddha!”

“That’s right. If we win here, it means this is Buddha-approved!!”

As soon as the cascade of water poured down, they were all swept away. For about a minute, the sounds of sutra strikes came from the Buddha that appeared at the bottom of the water. Finally, the mountain monks floated up, lying face-down in the water.

Once the older monks fished them out with bamboo poles, they all sounded refreshed.

“Ah ha ha! I feel like I was castrated from the bottom of my stomach to my crotch!”

“Okay! Let’s start from the beginning: browsing the divine network and saving any porn images we happen to come across!!”

“Yeah! Let’s use our refreshed worldly minds to awaken to a brand new genre!!”

Kimi and Mitotsudaira commented on the mountain monks who walked off with their arms around each other’s shoulders.

“Isn’t that just formatting the memory of their worldly minds?”

“And aren’t they looking at it all wrong if they’re thinking about ‘resisting’ it?”

“I’ve heard that some things just can’t be erased…”

Shinto could also purify impurities, but there was nothing they could do about the root problem. And even if they could, it would cause problems as far as ‘having many descendants’ was concerned. Plus, Shinto mythology tended to promote sexual things.

…It’s a tricky issue…

Asama took the other two along Mt. Takao. The mast portion was used for temple lodgings, so they did not need to go that far. Some trainee monks who had been lax in their training were being forced to bungee jump off the sail as many times as their age, but Asama could not quite remember if the Testament descriptions mentioned that or not.

“Asama, is that the reverse bungee using the towing belt’s ejection device that I’ve heard so much about lately? It shoots them up pretty high, doesn’t it?”

“I’ll agree that the training grounds here seem to be growing weirder and weirder.”

Some of the monks were jogging with an older monk in the lead.

“Listen! You are all pigs! You are from the Animal Realm! But I will whip you into shape so you can reach enlightenment! We’ll be singing a perverted song as we run to erase your worldly thoughts! …Freeze-dried tofu is good tofu~! It’s good for me~! And good for you~! C’mon!”

The others repeated after him and Asama wondered if she needed to set up any defenses against what they were saying.

But, she thought. *Does this work for a date or not?*

…Right now, we’re at a Buddhist theme par-…no. Some of the monks over there may be putting on a fire-walking show, but that must be part of their training.

“Tomo, um, is that dancing Mikkyo Mouse over there really a legitimate part of Buddhism?”

“Well, I think he’s part of the Animal Realm, but beyond that I don’t know.”

Kimi on the other hand seemed to be in a good mood as she clung to Asama’s right arm.

Asama wanted ask what she found to be so entertaining, but…

…A good escort doesn’t ask if their partner is enjoying the date.

If they assumed their partner was enjoying it and were looking for agreement, they were looking down on their partner. If they assumed their partner was not enjoying it and yet asked, then they were only looking for a convenient answer.

The correct answer was to find things that they assumed they and their partner would enjoy, guide them there, and naturally enjoy that time together.

If the knowledge Asama had gained from their previous discussion was accurate, then what people enjoyed would never match up if they tried to force it. And even if it did, it would not last long.

Then, thought Asama. *I need to figure out what it is we all enjoy.*

I need to find it.

“…Oh.”

Asama looked to an offering station to the side and saw a fire altar.

…If we use that to chant a sutra for a Buddhist spell, we can get anti-demon divine protection, can’t we?

She just about asked Kimi and Mito if they wanted to try it out, but then she started wondering if chanting a sutra and getting anti-demon divine protection would be a fun date activity.

“…Nn.”

It would help teach her the differences between Shinto and Buddhism and the divine protection would be useful for her work,

but…

…Th-that doesn't have much at all to do with Kimi or Mito.

Oh, no, she thought.

She had been glancing over at the various fire altars and other things for a while now, but she had been looking at them in the context of her work with spells.

To Kimi and Mito, she was being nothing more than a spell-obsessed freak.

"…"

She shuddered at her own actions.

She had no idea if the training grounds or anything else here were "fun".

She wanted to try out the different facilities, but that was because her work with spells made her curious if and how their divine protection and exorcism systems worked.

…Wow. I really am an obsessed freak.

She had assumed this date plan had been on her home field, but that was wrong. In a way, it was a complete away game where she could only score own goals.

…Oh, no…

Getting out of here as quickly as possible was the best course of action. When their enjoyment was so out of sync, it was better to leave and go somewhere else than to make a mistake. But…

"Asama."

Kimi pulled on her right arm.

Shaken by the other girl's slowed pace, Asama turned to the right. She did not even have time to tilt her head. She decided to ask

while hoping Kimi would not ask anything weird about the surrounding facilities.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Silly girl. You walked right past it.”

A small public fire altar was set up on the side of the path.

“Heh heh. How about we all try it out together?”

…Ehhhhh!? But what if my spell-obsessed blood gets all fired up!?

Despite Asama’s worries, Kimi pulled on her arm, but Mitotsudaira pulled in the opposite direction.

“W-wait. I have the Cerberus with me! What if he gets exorcised?”

Asama thought to herself while being pulled on from either direction.

…Oh, am I really popular right now or something?

Mitotsudaira spoke to Kimi while focused on the Cerberus on her head.

“Buddhist divine protections exorcise instead of purify. That means they entirely erase the target instead of just getting rid of the impurity. What if it affects my Cerberus?”

“Um, Mito?”

Asama tried to say something with a serious look on her face, but Kimi nestled up against the girl’s arm and cut her off.

Kimi lowered her eyebrows in a smile while looking back and forth between Mitotsudaira and the Cerberus.

“Heh heh. Then can’t you just put Troiko down and have him wait until we’re done?”

“A-and have him feeling left out!?”

“Oh? Is the Mitotsudaira family unable to discipline its servants?”

“N-now you’ve said it!”

Mitotsudaira placed the Cerberus on the ground.

“I can to discipline him! See!?”

She tried taking a step away, but the Cerberus dashed over to her.

…D-do you have no patience at all!?

She was at a loss for words, but Kimi and Asama spoke up behind her.

“Talk about a lack of discipline…”

“Yes, I expected her to coddle the thing, but I never thought it would be just as clingy…”

“Qu-quiet down, you two!”

Mitotsudaira picked up the Cerberus and placed it back down. She made sure it sat down, rubbed its head, and told it with her eyes to stay put. Then Kimi spoke from behind her.

“Dat’s a good bwoy~ Shtay right dere~ Heh heh heh!”

“I was not saying that!!”

Not in baby talk anyway, she added silently.

The Cerberus still looked like it would get up and dash after her the second she gave it an opening, but she somehow got it to sit down and then she pulled her hips back.

Taking a step back would not work.

If she did that, it would dash after her, so she started by pulling her hips back to place her body backwards. Then, instead of taking a step back with her feet, she pulled the rest of herself back. She

guessed the Cerberus would not dash after her like this.

It did not.

Good, good, she thought while holding her palms out to the Cerberus.

He can learn like this, she thought.

“Stay,” she said to help.

It dashed toward her.

…Khhh!!

Honestly, the stupid thing doesn’t know how to do what he’s told, she thought while Kimi and Asama spoke behind her.

“They often say this kind of thing shows how you were raised yourself.”

“Does that mean Mito was undisciplined back with her parents?”

“What are you two whispering about!?”

The Cerberus barked as if in response.

This isn’t good, thought Mitotsudaira while gently lifting the Cerberus up to eye level.

“Um, listen. A servant is supposed to listen to what his master says.”

“Mito! Mito! Pets are also seen as prized possessions, so you could also go that route here!!”

“B-but…” Mitotsudaira looked back toward Asama and Kimi. “I’m from a knight family. Even a pet needs to have a proper master/servant relationship!”

She held her chest out proudly, but Kimi raised a hand.

Mitotsudaira had a bad feeling about this, so she narrowed her eyes as she asked about it.

“What is it?”

“Judge. …If you think pets should have a master/servant relationship, does that mean your master/servant relationship with your king comes from a desire to be his pet?”

At first, she had no idea what Kimi meant.

…*Eh?*

She read back through it in her heart, grasped the meaning, comprehended it, and imagined it, but Asama reacted first.

“W-wait, Kimi! You mean Mito would have a chain around her neck while she goes on a walk with a nudist, gets all excited as he feeds her, and marks the area when they come to a stop no matter how embarrassing it might be? And then she sleeps in his bed in place of a heater!? What are you thinking!? There’s such a thing as being too cruel even among friends!!”

“You’re the cruel one, Tomo!!”

However, Mitotsudaira did recall seeing her mother and father heading to their bedroom with chains and collars around their necks, so perhaps that was something similar. When she had asked what the chains were for, her mother had said, “Heh heh. That’s too treat a bit of a disease we get. It’s something like rabies, so we start drooling and biting at each other. But it heals up by the next morning, so there’s nothing to worry about.” She was pretty sure she had heard a long, shrill scream from her father after that, so thinking back, her mother might not have been healed after all.

But…

…*Being his servant by being his pet!?*

She had never thought of that before. Perhaps she could think of that as a new set of values.

She started to imagine it, although not as vividly as Tomo had.

She did not think too deeply about it. It was more about what kind

of situation that would be or the general feel it would have. She was just taking a quick peek.

…Um…

“Now, imagine your king is sitting in a chair. You are sitting on the floor next to him. You take his hand and place it on your throat to have him scratch you while you whine. Once you can’t hold back any longer, you move in front of him, place yourself between his legs, and rub your throat against him. You try to snatch the snack he’s eating with the corner of your mouth, but you end up knocking both of you and the chair over. You end up lying on top of him, and…”

“Qu-quit butting into my imagination!”

…Ah, Tomo is giving me a shocked look!

You’ve got it all wrong! she thought as a sign frame opened between the three of them. For some reason, it displayed the white stealth sky.

“Hi, this is Naruze. I-I was flying around, but I got another sudden nosebleed and crashed. …W-were you sending out some weird sexual signal over the airwaves?”

Mitotsudaira was not sure what the Technohexen meant, but Asama took one glance at the shape of the sky on the screen and said, “Oh, that’s Oume’s 3rd wide block. I’ll contact the contract station in Hamura and have someone who can provide free medical care sent out.”

Mitotsudaira sighed and let Asama take care of Naruze.

She picked the Cerberus up again.

“Why don’t the two of you go get a divine protection from that fire altar without me?”

“Eh? But the Cerberus would be fine.”

“What?”

Mitotsudaira's head fell forward and Tomo explained.

"Thanks to the rules of the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism, a local god like that will be treated like a lowest-level Buddha, so he won't be exorcised."

"Y-you could have told me earlier!"

"Well, I tried to stop you when you started talking about exorcism, but…"

Who was it that had cut her off? The culprit had turned the other way with her shoulders shaking.

…Kimi!

Mitotsudaira knew baring her fangs would not get through to that girl, so…

"Tomo! …Let's leave that trickster here and go get the divine protection without her!"

Mitotsudaira grabbed onto Asama's arm and started toward the fire altar space.

Asama smiled a little at Mitotsudaira's behavior.

She could be a little strict as a knight, but she would become more like the others when that was not necessary. She of course needed an excuse or justification for that transformation, but Kimi had provided that here.

…This really is a give-and-take kind of thing…

Asama found that a little amusing, but then she realized where they were.

A lantern-like pedestal and a small fire altar vending machine were set up in a forest clearing. Kimi had already bought the materials to make a fist-sized wooden framework.

“Now, let’s get started.”

“C’mon, Tomo. We don’t know how to do this, so can you put it together for us?”

…Ehhhhhh!?

How could you ask that of a spell-obsessed freak? she thought. *B-but this is fine. I just have to avoid going crazy like that. Yes, if I do it naturally and on instinct…no, that’s getting into obsession territory. So, um, I need to grab the altar wood like I have no idea what I’m doing.*

“…Tomo? Your hand is shaking like crazy.”

“N-no, this is fine. This is perfectly normal. B-but, y’know. I don’t know all that much a-about this kind of thing.”

“Heh heh. But, Asama, how does this work?”

“Oh, well, you set fire to the altar once it’s set up and summon the power of a Buddha using a mantra. The ether effect synchronizes with the heat conduction of the fire, so passing the heat through things will burn away any impurities or apply a divine protection. The way the heat conduction style of divine protection spreads is dependent on the way the altar is set up, so you mainly want to build it vertically. But it’s actually more efficient if it swells out in the center.”

She realized what she had done only after answering.

…N-now I’ve done it!!

She had claimed not to know much about it and now this. She was acting like a nerd.

But…

“I see.”

That was all Mitotsudaira and Kimi said as they began helping with the construction of the small altar.

…Eh?

Asama did not understand.

Weren't they going to leave this to her? But those two were each constructing a side of the fist-sized altar while Asama dealt with the rest.

Then they stuck the charm stick into the pedestal's central hole.

"We light the incense while chanting the mantra."

Buddhist prayers did not ask for things like love. They were mostly on a large scale such as for an entire nation or they were for protection from demons or illness. Instead of improving daily life…

…They protect you from unpleasant things.

Kimi lit the end of the charm and it started burning down faster than expected.

After she grabbed a pinch of incense from the small bag provided and sprinkled it on the charm, the smoke and aroma spread out. Asama and Mitotsudaira watched Kimi fan it over toward them.

"What kind of charm is this?" asked Asama.

"One I don't need."

"Then what is it?"

"I told you: one I don't need."

"And. What. Is. It?"

Kimi refused to answer, so Asama snatched the bag in front of her and checked the effect written on it.

"Boy repellent… Ehhh!? What is this!?"

Asama saw Kimi tilting her head while repeating "oh, dear" over

and over.

Kimi pointed at herself with both hands.

“This is a Buddhist prayer for love, right? It makes boys other than your beloved have a harder time noticing your charm. The part of your presence that invites worldly thoughts is sealed off to everyone but a specific person.”

“No, um, uh. I’m supposed to draw customers… I show up in commercials and stuff. Just the other day, my dad and I did a Shinto home shopping guide.”

“Heh heh. Now what’s the real reason? …Do you have someone in mind?”

“Um, uh…”

There was nothing to get so flustered about. She knew that, but Kimi was smiling and egging her on and Mitotsudaira joined in with a bitter smile.

“Of course, who knows how useful this kind of cheap divine protection is. But it can still act as a symbol. From now, one we need to be aware of how we each feel about a ‘boy repellent’.”

“With that decided, let it wash over you. You need to get your money’s worth.”

…Does this really mean anything?

Asama wondered that as the fire’s heat washed over her and the incense smoke surrounded her.

“C’mon,” said Kimi. “You’re dense when it comes to yourself, so you need this most of all.”

She fanned over the thickest part of the smoke.

Asama could sense the incense reaching her and passing through her hair. The fire altar’s divine protections interfered with the ones she already had. Hanami appeared and automatically resolved any

issues, but it concerned Asama when she saw “Beloved Person: Set by user’s feelings”.

And then…

“You’re too jumpy, Asama.” Kimi cut in. “You should know better than us how little a cheap divine protection like this can do.”

“But…it’s still a divine protection…”

“It’s set by your feelings, isn’t it? So are you afraid you can’t control your own thoughts?”

“_____”

Asama did not know what to say and Kimi’s smile grew.

“Heh heh. You would normally say love is off limits for shrine maidens, but you mistakenly thought this kind of divine protection means you have to fall in love with someone, didn’t you?”

“I-I was not mistaken.”

“Then you were correct to think that?”

Asama could immediately tell this was a play on words. It was simply a clever shift of meaning in what she said.

But…

“Don’t worry,” said Kimi. “When it comes down to it, you won’t be mistaken.”

“Wait.”

Asama held out her hands to stop the girl, but the smoke blew over. Feeling there was no helping that, she spoke up.

“Are you saying I’m mistaken or not?”

“If I had to say, I guess you aren’t.”

After all…

“When it’s something that really matters to you, you always do what you want in the end.”

“Th-that isn’t true. Shrine maidens have to be selfless, you know?”

“Oh? And who are you being selfless for?

“Eh…?”

Asama was not sure what to say again and Mitotsudaira smiled bitterly next to her.

“Well, you certainly are letting people like Kimi push you around.”

Asama did not dare agree lest Kimi take it as a promise. But…

…*Hmm…*

Was she really that stubborn in the very end?

And even if she was, there was someone she could not say no to. But…

…*I wonder.*

Was she mistaken about her inability to say no to that person? Or was she correct because those things were more or less what she herself wanted?

She recalled why she was here and why it was she had decided to form a band.

“_____”

Was she mistakenly using his words there? Or was the desire inside her the same as what he hoped for?

…*I wonder.*

She started thinking more about it, but…

“C’mon, your incense is the only one left. Hurry up and use it.”

Asama looked Kimi in the eye as the girl fanned the thinning smoke over toward her.

…*Honestly.*

That girl and that boy could easily push her heart around. She could be strict, but she could relax around those two and perhaps that was why she wanted to be pushed around by them.

If so, everything she was doing now was a mistaken understanding of her own desire to be pushed around.

"…I see."

"What do you see?"

"If I do what I want in the very end, then I can't know whether I was mistaken or not without going to the very end."

"What?"

Mitotsudaira tilted her head, but Asama ignored her and dumped her bag of incense onto the charm. The incense quickly burned, producing bluish-white smoke.

"I'm not giving you any of this."

Asama fanned it to herself.

"Oh, c'mon," said Kimi. "Of course I'm going to want it if you say that."

"Well, you can't have any. This is a barrier I need to keep unwanted focus off of me as I continue on to the very end. I need to find the answer quickly."

After all, there were only six days until the Gagaku Festival. She wanted to see what it was she wanted before then, so she let the smoke pass through her hair and clothes.

…*Honestly.*

Those two always brought trouble.

But, she thought in her heart.

…Trouble is one thing Shinto shrines are meant to deal with.

As she wondered how to confirm she was correct and not mistaken, she let the incense pass through her body.

“While we’re at it, how about we give ourselves more divine protections to repel unnecessary things?”

“Oh, dear. Are you trying to keep us all for yourself just because we’re on a date?”

I was always planning to do that, she thought. After all…

“I’m very strict. Even when it comes to dates.”

Chapter 8: Singer Atop the Box

Who wants to say

That is exactly why

Instead of saying

You leave me no choice

Point Allocation (Us)

There were several methods of traveling from Takao, third starboard ship, to Oume, which was on the other side of Okutama.

The standard was to use the land route across the towing belts between Takao, Okutama, and Oume. This could be done on foot, by carriage, or by relatively cheap but inferior vendors who offered the spell-based “Racing Piggyback Ride” or the physical-based “Prostration Palanquin”, but…

“The most direct way is on top of a container on the towing belt ring.”

That comment came from Margot Naito, the Schwarz Hexen who sat on a wooden container being transported to the rear of Musashi with her broom still between her legs.

She opened a Magie Figur on top of that wooden box that measured twenty meters long and five meters wide and tall.

The screen was not transparent and did not display anything on the reverse side. The visible angles on the left and right were also narrowed. After making sure that no one else could see, she checked what had just been sent to her.

“An Edel Brocken tester, hm?”

This isn’t good, she thought. She had a simple reason for that.

…I can’t seem to get motivated.

“Tonight we need our second Gagaku Festival rehearsal on Asakusa to make up for last night’s pathetic rehearsal, but…”

They had three songs to sing, but they had run out of time after just the first one the day before. That was due to the short rehearsal time, but they were similarly only planning to sing the second song

today. Her second Magie Figur contained the lyrics for the second song and stick figures showing the choreography.

…The first one is easy to sing and pretty catchy, so we need to add more depth with the second one.

The song's title was Streiken Schreck. Instead of referring to a worker's strike, it referred to a striking cannon. It was a Technohexen song. They had made their own version of the old requiems that spoke of resistance.

From the Middle Ages to the present day, the Technohexen had resisted persecution and that continued in some areas even now, but they had their own songs of resistance that were meant to inspire and connect them together.

Even Technohexen who lived in peace needed to fight to save, shelter, and preserve the peace of their fellow Technohexen. Having a song of resistance at times like that meant a lot to their trust in each other.

This song was not something to make very public. After they performed it at their second year Gagaku Festival to confirm their presence in Musashi as Technohexen before becoming the main force of the students as third years, they had thought about hiding the song, but…

"Hmm."

Naito thought about their rehearsal and replayed the lyrics in her head, but she could not get into the mood. She started with Naruze's part.

"She who shows no resistance. A child who turns her back and falls to earth."

She tried emphasizing "resistance", but she still was not feeling it.

"Abandon the holy and outlast the gallows. Without a sound, look ahead to the future."

Should that be "look ahead to" or "view"? she wondered, but she still

was not feeling it.

Then she reached her part.

“The racing flame, the quaking iron, the gouging steel, the piercing spine of wind.”

Is it coming?

“I understand. This is my home. Even as we turn our backs, we are white and black.”

No, it just isn’t working, she thought while taking a breath.

As she muttered the lyrics to herself, she reverse-crossed herself as was customary for Technohexen songs.

“Nema. I accept that everything was in reverse.”

She placed a hand on the brim of her hat and pulled it down before continuing.

“Herrlich.”

She took another breath.

…Hmm. I just can’t get motivated.

What was this about becoming an Edel Brocken tester?

That meant taking part in Edel Brocken’s development of new equipment. It meant to become the next generation and remain active until someone even greater came along. And until that happened, they could use all the latest equipment they wanted. They would have to go through the right channels, but they would have backups for all the expendable goods and they would have proper insurance.

It was the ultimate luxury for a Technohexen if they did not wish for a peaceful life.

But…

“If I try to become a tester, I have to challenge Wild Kamelie…”

That was when she heard a loud noise in the low sky created by the stealth barrier. Something was pressing on the wind, creating what sounded like the rumbling of distant thunder or a large drum.

“Is that…?”

She looked up into Shinagawa’s sky.

Several torii-style sign frames appeared inside the stealth barrier from the bow of the ship to its stern.

The sign frames were resetting the stealth barrier because it had been nearly shaken apart by something passing through it at high speed.

And that something was…

“Wild Kamelie…”

Two Magino Figur that measured speed appeared in Shinagawa’s sky at a distance of precisely four half-miles.

What speed could they reach in the four half-miles, or approximately four hundred meters, between the two? Technohexen called that acceleration race the Null Vier. The race was popular because it was short and thus easy to take part in even if you still had some afternoon work left.

The eternal champion of that race had just shot through the sky as the opening practice flight.

That was Wild Kamelie.

The result that had shaken the stealth barrier was visible even from Naito’s position.

“2.80 seconds on the 0-400…”

The final speed was also given in miles, but Naito read the one that said 912 kph since she found it easier to understand.

The woman had reached the upper limits of subsonic speeds in just under three seconds. That was partially due to the specs of her *schale besen*, but it also required an excellent acceleration control spell.

Needless to say, one's acceleration did not rise at an even rate. The limits of one's output and one's balance was greatly influenced by the size, structure, and materials of their *schale besen*. But since that woman had achieved a result like that, there was no point in belittling it.

Naito knew for a fact that Wild Kamelie was better than her.

…Could she reach the speed of sound if she had twice as much distance to work with?

Breaking the sound barrier in a little over five seconds was more acceleration than the fourth generation aerial gods of war that were becoming the main forces of the modern nations.

That would make her a threat to the Testament Union and the Tsirhc-focused European nations.

"That's probably why we limit ourselves to the 0-400 and only compete when we aren't being monitored."

Naito looked to the skies around the Musashi.

The woman behind that result was circling around the Musashi to slow down. Her orange jacket was proof she had been part of a Technohexen unit deployed to fight against Sviet Rus. The color was meant to resemble the sunset when Russia looked back toward M.H.R.R. and it was meant to bring fear to Sviet Rus as the power to bring "twilight".

Naito did not know what had brought Wild Kamelie to Musashi.

There were a variety of theories about that: she was rejected by a man despite being the head of the Technohexen unit, she fired on the house of a politician who asked for the impossible, she had trouble keeping the weight off while eating pirozhki every day, etc. Naruze had her own new theory.

“They found out she actually has a penis and chest hair. She’s got that kind of face.”

That one had started to spread recently and, long story short, Wild Kamelie had taken a liking to them.

Take now for instance:

“Hey there, Zwei Fräulein. Riding a container to preserve *auspuff*?”

Wild Kamelie called out to her while passing by the rear of Okutama in the distance.

Naito nodded toward her superior Technohexen in the distant sky.

“I messed up a bit planning deliveries the other day.”

“What did you do?”

“There’s a limited edition and a normal edition and I chose to deliver the normal edition, figuring it would be lighter, but it turns out the limited edition just has a super rare card with it while the normal edition has a one-tenth chance of randomly including a replica of the general’s head. …Oh, and this isn’t a porn game; it’s the fourth entry in the FPS series Modern War Fair.”

“What? Was it heavy or something?”

“No, the severed head replica fell down while I was delivering it and caused a huge commotion in Tama’s shopping district.”

“Oh, so you were the reason the alarm was ringing in the next wide block over when I was eating.”

“Judge, judge,” she nodded.

“You should really modify that broom or get a new one.”

“No, no. I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Someone gave it to me.”

Wild Kamelie briefly paused before replying.

“Then I guess there’s no helping it.”

Not asking too much about others was the rule for Technohexen. There was no point in trying to determine the identity of those at the Sabbat, so it was merely crass.

Technohexen were separated from the modern world. That was why they delivered packages and then left.

But…

“Schwarz Fräulein, who do you have left?”

“Marine, I think.”

For the time being…

“If we shoot down Marine in a mock battle, we’ll be the tentative champions.”

“Marine will be fired up about getting back at you for Almirante, so be careful.”

“You’re rooting for us?”

“Judge,” said Wild Kamelie as she circled toward Takao. “Marine is from Tres España, but you’re from M.H.R.R., making you the pure Technohexen. I’m the same. …I wouldn’t be true to myself if I didn’t root for you. And…”

“And?”

Yeah.

“This might be rude, but I do know about the Weiss Hexen village and Schwarz Hexen village in the mountains of southern M.H.R.R. And I know they both had their own anti-Technohexen unit.”

“I don’t think you really need to know about that.”

“Are you mad?”

“No. Now isn’t the time to decide if I am or not.”

“When is it the time?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“I see.” There was a bitter smile in her voice. “You’re pretty scary, Margot Naito. …That Weiss Fräulein with her biting aura is quite something herself, but both of you have a troublesome atmosphere that keeps anyone from approaching you too carelessly.”

“Are you trying to get me to let my guard down?”

“Are you trying to provoke me?”

“What if I said I wanted the position of tester?”

She went ahead and said it, but…

“Wait your turn.”

Naito knew what that immediate response meant.

It was exactly what she had expected, so…

“But I’m really not that motivated.”

“Don’t expect me to give you any.”

“Then maybe I should ask Ga-chan for some.”

“…”

“What is it?”

“Judge,” said Wild Kamelie as she grew more distant. “Are you planning to challenge me just because you got psyched up with your friend?”

“Only if that gives me the motivation. Also…”

“Also?”

“I wouldn’t be challenging you.”

“Are you saying I’ll lose to Marine?”

“No, no.” Naito looked straight up into the sky. “Our next challenger is Marine, but that’s not what I meant. If I do get some motivation from Ga-chan, I’ll only be after the position of tester to make sure that motivation doesn’t go to waste.”

“So you wouldn’t even be focused on me?”

“I already know who’s going in the center of my frame. I’ll let you in behind it or outside it, though.”

“You know what’s going to happen if you don’t get motivated after saying that, don’t you?”

“The reason I’m not feeling any motivation is that I think a peaceful life might be nice.”

Naito stood up.

The container she was riding was reaching the peak of its circular motion. At this highest point, she could cover quite a bit of distance just gliding, so she hooked the cart carrying the packages on her broom and started to take a step off of the container.

…*Eh?*

But a great noise filled the stealth space.

Someone had produced great acceleration in the sky above Shinagawa.

“…?”

She heard a few cheers from there.

She then checked the time and speed for the 0-400.

“2.89 seconds?”

The final speed was above 980 kph. The acceleration had risen rapidly at the end and that had produced a result rivalling Wild Kamelie's.

…*That was Marine.*

She was the final subordinate of Almirante, current manager of the individual delivery business, during his Tres España days. She was a winged descended angel just like Naito.

However, she did not use a broom to fly like the others did. The metal wings attached to her back and waist formed the basis of…

"An aerial mobile shell…"

"Tres España made those for landing and ship-to-ship battles what with the Armada battle coming up. To make sure any mistakes during testing weren't disastrous, they were primarily tested by winged nonhumans with narrow shoulders. The project eventually came to a standstill and Marine came here with one of the abandoned prototypes."

Naito nodded at Wild Kamelie's explanation.

…*Everyone with their own unique issues ends up gathering here…*

That was why they joined together and that was why they came into conflict. And…

"…Huh?"

Several screams were approaching from Takao to starboard.

What is that? she wondered as two girls in their academy uniform ran from near Mt. Takao to the boarding zone for the towing belt ring.

It was Asama and Mitotsudaira. And the reason behind the screams was chasing the girls.

"Heh heh heh! C'mon! Stop running away, Mitotsudaira, Asama! With this many divine protection sticks, the boys will never even

get close!! In fact, I've set these so any boy who approaches a girl covered by the smoke will be castrated!"

Kimi held bundles of divine protection sticks up like torches and ran after the other girls with smoke rising from both hands. Everyone in the vicinity cried out and fled, but Kimi suddenly stopped and looked both ways.

"You there! You've got the look of a guy who wants to be castrated!!"

"Eeeeeek!!"

After putting some distance between them, Asama fired an arrow at Kimi who was trying to castrate random passersby.

But…

"Kimi-chan's pretty great at dodging, so I doubt that'll hit."

That was exactly what happened, so the Takao loading zone only grew more chaotic. Then Naito vocalized a thought that came to her.

Because this place was a gathering of people with their own unique issues…

"This is normal for here."

So…

"If this is normal, then this is fine. But when I look at it like that, I really can't seem to work up any motivation."

The container moving up the towing belt ring had railings on the top because those transport containers were also used to view the Musashi.

Asama and Mitotsudaira fell to all fours and gasped for breath atop one.

But the idiot sister was not even out of breath as she spun around behind them while holding a new charm stick like a smoke bomb.

“Heh heh heh. The temple said the castration would be good advertisement but they didn’t want me to force it on anyone, so they gave me a charm stick for exorcising the impurities that affect beauty. Buddhism can be pretty great sometimes! C’mon, Asama! C’mon, Mitotsudaira! Let’s get nice and clean with this smoke! It’s on me today!!”

Curse this crazy girl, thought Asama while thinking back on everything she and her brother had done in the past. But…

…Huh? She hasn’t been all that bad today.

“T-Tomo, you’ve started looking at this in a weirdly positive light, haven’t you!? I can tell from the look on your face!”

“Well, this did give the Buddhist temple some advertisement.”

She saw Kimi spinning around with the smoking charm stick while Uzy opened a sign frame. It immediately booted up a spell named…

“Turning Point?”

“Judge. No one else can hear us up here in the sky. So…”

Kimi used a gentle spin to send her hair dancing through the air and looked Asama in the eye as her gaze passed by.

“If you’re asking us to form a band, you’ve made at least one song, haven’t you? Sing it here, Asama. That might change our minds.”

…Ehhhhh!?

That crazy person’s ideas were always far too sudden. In fact…

“B-but my song isn’t finished!”

She got up onto her knees and waved her hands back and forth. Then Mitotsudaira tilted her head.

“If it isn’t finished, does that mean you’re writing one?”

“Eh?”

Asama froze.

…*Oh, no!*

“I-I don’t have a song!”

“Then do you have the lyrics?”

Asama was unsure what to say. Her substitutions as a shrine maiden prevented her from lying, but she was allowed to remain silent or divert their attention if it was to preserve her privacy or keep others out of harm’s way. But even if writing a song was a private issue…

…*I kind of have to share that if we’re forming a band…*

She decided there was no point in risking a violation of her substitutions.

“I’ve been thinking…a bit…about some lyrics.”

She meant the night before.

On the way home from Suzu’s bathhouse, she had thought to herself in her heated head. She had thought not about herself, but about herself and her surroundings. She knew there was a lot she did not see or understand and she had created lyrics out of *everything beyond herself* that she could think of at the time.

She had not created even a single line of lyrics yet. She only had some keywords.

But…

…*Yes, that’s right.*

That was what it meant to write a song. She did not know how others did it, but for her, those were the words she wanted to make into a song. She wanted to send them outside. She wanted to ask

them.

Would she blush when she said them? Or could she do it without any fear?

She did not know, but she had one thing to say now.

“I do have some words I want to make into a song.”

“I see,” said Kimi.

Asama felt like her heart was being pulled upwards. She felt like Kimi had understood her feelings.

“U-um, it’s about-…!”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell us now.”

“But, uh…”

“Wait, wait.”

When Asama nearly argued back, Kimi held out the smoking charm stick to stop her. Asama was confused by that and by how the girl shrugged.

…*Why won’t she let me tell them?*

She wanted to sing those words and they would eventually be made public, so what was wrong with hearing them here and making a decision on them? But…

“Can a shrine maiden really present incomplete lyrics? She can’t, can she?”

“Oh…”

And…

“Listen. When people present an incomplete work, they might feel that was enough of an accomplishment and stop there or they might not get the feedback they were hoping for and change what they were trying to do. If you’ve written plenty of songs, you can

probably still finish it like that and changing the lyrics based on your changing feelings can work. But…"

But…

"What you're making now can only be made once."

Asama knew what she meant.

"My 'very first' lyrics…"

"Judge. You need to treat this with care. …Asama, I will protect what matters to you even if I have to protect it from you."

Asama nodded a little at that.

"Right…"

She had been leaning forward, but now she leaned back and lowered her butt into a sitting position on the container.

She had relaxed. And now that she thought about it…

…That was a close one.

I really can get too focused on this kind of thing.

It was not often that she was so intent on revealing something about herself, so…

"Do you understand?"

"Yes…"

She did.

"In the very, very end, I try to force myself through."

"I think my foolish brother and I are the only ones who can stop you there. Then again…" Kimi smiled bitterly as she turned to the side. "You need to reach that position too, Lady Knight. It's your job to prevent people from getting carried away, isn't it?"

“Y-you say that, but…”

Mitotsudaira looked over at Asama’s relaxed sitting position.

When Asama gave her a puzzled look, the girl’s golden eyes arched a little.

“I quite like that side of Tomo.”

“I-I’m more interested in what you think of me as a shrine maiden.”

“But I know very well that there’s more to you than just being a shrine maiden.”

So…

“I’m going to do what I can to interact with that side of you. Just like that idiot girl and boy do. It might be a difficult position, but I still want to do it.”

“Why does this make me feel really useless…?”

“That isn’t what this is about,” said Kimi. “You’re just a beginner at putting yourself out there. You’re very skilled at dealing with others, but you’re very poor at dealing with yourself. Being honest with yourself is a wonderful thing!”

“What happens if I’m honest with myself?”

The idiot girl spun the smoking charm stick around in her fingers and struck a “c’mon” pose.

“Now!!”

“Now…?”

“Ah! What’s that look for!? Heh heh heh. But you’ll be one of us before long! So, Mitotsudaira, you sing in her place!”

“What!? Why me!?”

“I heard all about it from my foolish brother. You sang a song for a knight league party or something, didn’t you? You must have a

knight's marching song. As the Extra Special Duty Officer for the Chancellor's Officers, you have some kind of song prepared, right?"

"W-well…"

"That settles it! Mitotsudaira will be singing a song for us."

"Ehh?"

Mitotsudaira was still confused, but Kimi pulled a microphone from her cleavage and tossed it to her. The Turning Point acoustic spell was already playing a few rhythms.

"It's making sure the sound doesn't scatter. Just start singing and it will play matching chords."

"B-but…"

Asama had a thought as she watched Mitotsudaira grip the microphone in both hands.

…She has her own song.

She had expected as much, but it felt somehow meaningful now that she knew for sure. Even a classmate who was not like Kimi had a song.

Of course, Mitotsudaira only had it as a part of being a knight, but…

…How much does that really matter for the peaceful Far East and Musashi?

Mitotsudaira had likely decided to write her own song to create an opportunity for herself, just like Asama had.

She had wanted to put the contents of her heart to words. So…

"Mito."

Asama faced Mitotsudaira while seated.

Mitotsudaira groaned and stepped back, but Asama did not care.

“This will be the first time you’re revealing your song, won’t it?”

“Eh? …Well, yes.”

“Then,” said Asama. “If you’re fine with us being the first to hear it, then please sing it.”

Mitotsudaira had a thought.

…Someone wants to hear it.

Did she have anyone she wanted to hear her song?

She briefly thought of her promise with her king, but…

…This song is different.

“Tomo, you two can hear it first.”

After all…

“The song inside me is about my insufficiency as a knight. Letting my king hear it would be the same as exposing my inexperience to him.”

“Heh heh. In other words, it’s a song about preparing yourself? That’s perfect for us now. What’s the title?”

“Hurrah for Late-Blooming.”

Asama gasped in surprise, so Mitotsudaira shrugged at the change in her expression.

“Didn’t I tell you? This isn’t a song I can let my king hear. I plan to give it an Hexagone Française title once I make the true version.”

Mitotsudaira tried timing the tempo with her hands. It seemed a little fast, but…

…This is about right.

Kimi responded by tapping Turning Point's sign frame with her toes.

Its tempo matched hers, and…

"Ah…"

Kimi released her voice.

She closed her eyes and gathered the note in her throat. It was the same way Asama produced her voice during Shinto rituals.

However, this was not a single sound. It started low and gradually grew higher. The reverberation continued at length, twisted back as if echoing, and finally bent.

"Oh, I'll take that one.

On Mitotsudaira's instruction, Uzy spun in midair.

The Mouse waved her fan and lifted up the instant of vocalization Kimi had just made. She recorded the sound that Mitotsudaira thought was appropriate for the first key.

Kimi looked to the sign frame that Uzy held up and smiled.

"I can make most of it from this. Okay, Mitotsudaira, sing for us until the container reaches the top. This will be a test and you can do it for real next time."

"Judge."

Mitotsudaira looked to Asama who was looking her way with her eyes fully open.

…Oh, dear.

Mitotsudaira felt a small smile deep in her chest.

…Is she that interested in someone else's song?

"Don't expect too much. This is a song of preparation, after all."

“Right, right.”

Asama nodded, but she maintained her firm seated position.

A drum played. It was a Western style one.

The tempo was a little different from the four-on-the-floor one that Kimi always used. There were more other noises in this one, but…

…It’s an ensemble version.

The sounds overlapped and joined together. After counting to three, Mitotsudaira felt the timing was right.

She held up the microphone, opened her mouth, and closed her eyes.

…Oh, am I showing off?

With that thought, she began singing.

“Hurrah for late-blooming. Hurrah for constant change.”

The wolf’s voice slipped into Asama’s ears.

“Far, far ahead with nothing to guide the way.”

Asama sensed something.

“I pretended to trust in myself.”

She sensed that this was different from the usual Mitotsudaira.

“A mistaken hurrah for late-blooming.”

Was she usually this self-restrained?

“Far, far ahead where I can’t bear to look.”

Asama sensed something else as well.

“I knew there was nothing there.”

She sensed that this was the same as the usual Mitotsudaira.

“A cowardly hurrah for late-blooming.”

This was her old self.

“Hurrah for late-blooming. Hurrah for constant change.”

It was the part of her that could not forget what had once happened.

“Not enough is new.”

Mitotsudaira had said this was about her insufficiency.

“I make my embrace by crawling.”

She had said it was not yet suitable for her king.

“I act tough by saying that is only natural.”

But she acted tough and added in a howling “lu lu”.

“Hurrah for late-blooming. Hurrah for constant change.”

She repeated herself and faced ahead.

“Everything from the past is so kind.”

Oh, thought Asama in silent admiration.

“What is holding me back crumbles away.”

Mitotsudaira was from Hexagone Française.

“I feel so much lighter in the moonlight.”

She was proud of that while also standing on Musashi’s side.

“Hurrah for late-blooming. Hurrah for constant change.”

She swore to eventually overcome her past self.

“The new things are so miserable.”

But the silver wolf knew she had a long way to go.

“I weep and then stand back up.”

That was exactly what she had done.

“Hurrah for late-blooming. Everything changes.”

She had once suddenly returned to them and then cried as if howling.

“I believe in it all and act tough.”

And now she acted as if nothing had happened.

“Even if I wish to immerse myself in the past.”

She had a single piece of evidence.

“Hurrah for late-blooming. I slip from the yoke.”

That evidence told her that nothing like the past would happen again.

“Without howling, I now race through the wind.”

And so she had chosen to continue forward.

That was the end of her lyrics.

…You could tell I wasn’t sure if I should sing in my usual tone of voice or not. I need to work on that.

She repeated part of the latter half as a refrain as if trying to convince herself of something. And…

“_____”

She finished.

When singing it on her own, she was at home and playing a string instrument, so there were no drums. Kimi's Turning Point supplied that and she could tell how much having the bass notes helped.

…If she can make sheet music out of this, I should probably get a copy.

As she thought that, the accompaniment ended, as did the song.

"Now, then."

She took a breath and faced forward.

Asama was there.

What had that girl thought? It had likely sounded strange to someone so familiar with Gagaku, but…

"Tomo…"

She trailed off. She had wanted to ask the girl what she thought, but her lips formed different words.

"U-um, Tomo?"

She asked a question.

"Why are you crying?"

"Wha-…?"

Asama was confused by Mitotsudaira's question.

The words "I can't be crying" and the thought "I guess it's fine if I am since I'm with friends" mixed together inside her.

"…"

She brought a hand to her cheek and did indeed find tears there.

What did this mean? She was a Shinto shrine maiden who had a close relationship with words and controlled herself with words, so how had someone else's song shaken her in such a mysterious way?

Oh, I get it.

That song must have shown me something of her.

What had once been, what was there now, and what would likely be there one day had all reached Asama in words that were noticeably Mitotsudaira's.

"That's right."

There had been no lies in it.

Something had happened to Mitotsudaira in the past. Asama knew the beginning, had seen the middle, and did not know much about the end.

But she could make a good guess what had happened in the end.

Those words had created who Mitotsudaira was now and they had allowed her to say goodbye to her former self and become something new while still accepting who she had been before.

That was a song about not giving up despite knowing how difficult it is to make herself into something different.

The powerful self-restraint and self-admonition was likely because it had to do with how wild she had once been. So…

…Will the contents of this song eventually change?

Mitotsudaira had said it was a song of preparation.

She had said she would use a different song when with her king. In that case…

"I hope you can make your song something else one day."

Asama wiped away her tears as she said that.

“I…”

Mitotsudaira’s eyes widened in obvious surprise.

That was a song of preparation. It was her song at the moment, but it would no longer suit her at some point. It would become a song of nice memories. So Asama had something else to say.

“I know you can do it.”

She sent her words to the girl.

Silence followed.

Mitotsudaira held the microphone in both hands and stared at her, but then…

“…?”

The Cerberus on her head tilted its three heads and its weight pushed her head forward.

“…”

Fingers quickly wiped at the corners of the eyes behind the long bangs, but when the silver wolf raised her head again, she was smiling.

“Of course I can. A knight cannot spend her entire life preparing herself.”

“Heh heh. Why are you two crying together?”

Behind Mitotsudaira, Kimi spun the charm stick in her fingers as it began to lose its smoke.

But…

“I was not crying,” said Mitotsudaira. “That smoke you’re waving around stung my eyes is all. I am a half-werewolf, so I am sensitive to that kind of smell.”

“Oh? Well, we can go with that if you want.” Kimi put her hands on

her hips. “But Mitotsudaira. …That song is your song, but it’s also a song of preparation, isn’t it?”

“Judge. I use it to fill my heart when I advance as a knight.”

Mitotsudaira’s plain statement led Kimi to slowly glance over at Asama. Asama knew what Kimi wanted to say, but she let her say it.

“This wolf knight certainly is full of something, isn’t she?”

“Wh-what do you mean by that?”

When Mitotsudaira blushed and protested, Asama could only nod.

But she also understood why Kimi had had Mitotsudaira sing.

…The lyrics and intent of Mito’s song are pretty obvious to us.

If someone ignorant of her past heard that, it would probably sound like the song of a knight who was hard on herself and filled with tragic bravery and self-admonition.

But it was different to them.

Asama thought on the fact that the song would send a different message to different people.

…Oh, I get it.

It’s okay if that happens, she realized as calm filled her.

She had been confused about something after speaking with Torii and the others the night before. How could that girl expose herself and her feelings with no one to communicate those feelings to?

But how people interpreted one’s feelings differed from person to person.

Asama only needed try to convey her thoughts in her own way.

If that stimulated something in the listener’s feelings or memories, then it was a good song.

“That’s right.”

“Heh heh. Why do you look so enlightened all of a sudden?”

“Well, I do feel pretty enlightened about something…”

The task of writing a song felt like less of a burden now, but she also felt like she understood the depth of meaning and breadth of mind behind it.

There were no rules about how much of herself to expose, how much of herself to hide, how much to let people know, and how much to keep away from people. The level of one’s “self” in the lyrics differed from writer to writer and from song to song.

Inside jokes were okay to use. It was okay to make it so others could understand them or notice them, but it was also okay to keep them hidden.

Love songs were the same.

She often heard songs from Musashi or other nations. With most of the love songs she had heard, how much had she actually thought about the writer of the song?

Of course, if a writer was producing lyrics for a singer, the lyrics would have no direct link to the singer. But in that case, how would the singer present the lyrics given to them?

…In that case, the singer’s feelings will create another layer on top of the writer’s feelings.

If they lined up well, it could create deeper meaning. If not, it could lessen the meaning.

…Then, um, wait a second. That would mean…

The appearance and quantity of lyrics on the lyrics cards or on the sign frame when singing karaoke with everyone was not what mattered.

There was also a “feelings” aspect to it all.

So how could one strengthen the “feelings” contained inside their lyrics?

Would the song’s writer sing it or would they leave it with a different singer?

How did one place their “feelings” in the song they were singing?

Did the song match them?

Did their voice match the song?

And how much would the listener be able to understand?

“_____”

Asama felt faint when she imagined the incredible variation allowed by different intensities and arrangements of expression.

…*Honestly!*

In Gagaku, she was always singing songs for her god.

She was confident that she could sing nice and loud and she thought she was decent at playing an instrument, but…

…*Everything I’ve done has been made to play before my god…*

Depending on the song, she sometimes included her emotions to help convey the meaning to her god.

But she did not know how the lyrics she used had been created. She had simply seen the instructions to “sing this part happily” and thought back on her experiences to summon up the emotion of happiness and sing accordingly.

“Wow.”

A shudder ran through her body.

She had performed Gagaku for so long, but was it possible she had never truly performed a song before?

If so…

…*Wow.*

“Heh heh. Why are you hanging your head in shock?”

“Well, um…”

She thought for a bit.

Her singing was quite good as a Shinto ritual and did an excellent job of taking command of the scene. But…

“I might be good when I have a set form laid out for me…but that’s useless as a free singer, isn’t it?”

“Oh? I would say skill at a set form gives you an incredible advantage.”

“That’s right,” added Mitotsudaira. “That means you know how to vocalize a song and it means you have all the basic knowledge. …In my case, there are hardly any Western music teachers in Musashi, so I had to take lessons from a high school teacher to reach this level.”

“That’s pretty amazing really. And in that case, just how abnormal is Kimi?”

“Uzume gives me everything I need,” said the abnormal girl. “And my foolish brother is about at my level. He performs song offerings with me.”

Asama could tell she and Mitotsudaira had stopped moving.

…*Kh.*

“Toori-kun has an entertainer god contract with our Sakuya, not with Ootsubaki, so he shouldn’t have the same advantages as you, Kimi.”

“Then maybe that means he has even more skill than me. Heh heh. Not bad for a foolish brother. I need to challenge him next time we

do karaoke together. But…”

Kimi patted Mitotsudaira on the back as the girl stood in dumbfounded shock just like Asama.

“C’mon, c’mon.”

Kimi could not hide the crescent moon smile beyond Mitotsudaira’s shoulder.

“Being a knight must be tough. …You’ll be in trouble if you sing in front of your king and you turn out to be worse at it than him, won’t you? Heh heh heh.”

“Without those last three words, I could have just ignored that provocation in about two seconds!!”

Mitotsudaira bared her teeth and turned back toward Kimi, but then she reached back, grabbed Asama’s hand, and gave her a sharp look.

“Tomo!”

“Oh, y-yes?”

“Let’s continue our date!”

Why? she wondered, but the silver wolf answered before she could ask.

“You need to work harder to make sure that idiot girl and I will… join your band! At the very least, I can’t sing in front of my king until I can sing better than this crazy person!”

Kimi opened her mouth where Mitotsudaira could not see and silently mouthed some words.

“Such an indirect girl!”

Asama could clearly make out the exclamation point, but that may have been thanks to Kimi’s skill as an entertainer. That skill was surprisingly high.

But at the same time, Mitotsudaira's gaze grew harsher.

"How about it!?"

"S-sure…"

When will she ever be able to reach Kimi's level? she wondered, but…

…It's a goal at least.

She nodded toward Mitotsudaira.

"I'll do my best to make this date a success."

While holding Asama's hand, Mitotsudaira opened a sign frame and checked back over their date plan.

Kimi could tell her own expression was relaxing as she watched from behind.

…Such slow girls.

She was one of those girls, but the others were far less aware of it.

When she found herself hesitant to act, she would immediately take action. That was her motto.

But when the other two realized the same thing about themselves, they would start by finding a compromise. They would wonder if it was okay for them to do it and seek out a reason beyond the simple fact that they wanted to do it.

They lost their chance to strike while the iron was hot.

By the time they caught on, they were buried in reasons and could not dig themselves out when they grew tired of it all.

That method was not nimble enough.

…But maybe I don't need to worry.

As she watched Mitotsudaira and Asama checking over the date plan, she could tell Asama had not lost her motivation despite learning how hard writing a song was and she could tell Mitotsudaira was fired up as well.

Most likely, Mitotsudaira had also sensed the will behind Asama's reaction.

The song she had sung was definitely that knight's present self. And while placing her feelings in a song, she had kept them hidden.

Kimi was not about to ask why that was.

Mitotsudaira would have sensed that her feelings had reached Asama. The feelings inside her song had entirely gotten through to the other girl.

"…"

Kimi was glad Mitotsudaira had not looked back for a while.

She was glad Asama was not looking her way.

After all, what had her expression been when the silver wolf had finished her song?

…Foolish brother.

You might not know it, but we're preparing for something different from ten years ago.

"I'm looking forward to what that will make me feel and how I will accept it."

She whispered that under her breath, but then…

"…? Naito?"

"Hi. It looked like you were busy, so I was watching from above."

The Schwarz Hexen flew down toward them.

“Ah,” said Asama and the others as they made room.

Kimi watched as Naito flew down with her golden wings whipping up the wind.

The cart hanging from the Technohexen’s broom was full of packages. If she was on her way to deliver those…

“Heh heh. Shouldn’t you hurry? Or do you need something? This impurity exorcising incense is still active.”

When Naito landed while still on her broom, Kimi grabbed her hat and waved the incense charm stick around saying “How about it?” over and over. For just an instant, the Technohexen’s divine protection spell reacted, but…

“Is that okay?”

“Eh? Oh, judge. It doesn’t seem to mix well with Classic Signs, but since it’s Buddhist, it should fall under the pagan spell category and provide me with about 80% of its effects. So it’s fine.”

Kimi smiled bitterly as Naito lifted her feathers to let the incense pass through her wings.

“So did something happen? Heh heh. If you need some advice, I might be willing to listen.”

“Judge. We’re doing another Gagaku Festival rehearsal at the Asakusa cargo plaza, right? Well, we were just so lame at last night’s rehearsal.”

“In your styling?”

“No, no.” Naito shook her hand. “In our choreography.”

“Kimi, you’re an expert at that, so if you go…”

Mitotsudaira trailed off as she realized something.

“Oh, Tomo, we have a shift working for your shrine tonight, don’t we?”

“Yes, so we’ll be heading there regardless. …And personally, I kind of want to hear Naito and Naruze sing.”

“Judge, judge. It would be great if you and Mito-tsan were watching as an audience.”

It made Kimi kind of happy how seriously Asama repeated “as an audience”. But…

“But what is this about, Naito? I wouldn’t think Naruze would care about people watching her.”

“Well…” Naito lowered her eyebrows in a way that was unusual for her. “We have our reasons. Lately, I’ve wanted to avoid doing anything that lets people look down on us.”

“Did you do something to the third years?” asked Mitotsudaira.

That meant a lot more coming from a former trailblazer in that field, so Naito quickly waved her hands back and forth.

“No, not the third years. Someone even higher. Y’know, from the delivery business.”

“Oh, you mean the people in the Geheimnis Shabbat? You’re pretty high up in the ranks, aren’t you?”

“That’s pretty much it.”

She must have had a major match coming up.

…I see.

Everyone was acting on their various thoughts.

“I can’t just sit around either.”

As Kimi said that, she heard a song in the distance.

It was a song she had heard in the mornings and afternoons more often lately. It was an automaton singing the Song of Passage.

“Are there feelings behind this too?”

“Heh heh. Asama, even automatons have souls.”

“Automatons?”

Mitotsudaira, Asama, and Naito must not have known about P-01s because they did not connect the comment to the song.

“We used to play with Horizon a lot using this song, didn’t we?”

Everyone’s expression changed at that, but Kimi no longer felt any fear. The time to sit around had ended the night before. So…

“C’mon, Asama. Let’s continue our date.”

Asama’s expression changed again when she heard that.

“Yes, that’s fine. …We need to continue from Oume to Murayama!”

Musashi’s shrine maiden grabbed Mitotsudaira’s arm and pulled it close.

“I’ll make sure this is a success!”

Make sure you take good care of that.

Afterword

At any rate, that was Kimitoasamade I-B.

As a story, II will continue directly after this, but I decided to bring I to an close now that everyone had confirmed what they intend to do. Otherwise, it would be hard to say this counts as a conclusion to the I story. Yes.

Anyway, it's thanks to all of you that I can bring you this story set a year beforehand. Thank you very much.

Even if this "one year ago" story is set just before spring, it has a lot focused in on it. A lot of new things begin in spring both business-wise and academy-wise. My first goal is to gather together as much of that as I can while bringing the story to those three girls' debut.

But when I think back to what I was doing at that time in my life, I find what I'm doing hasn't really changed that much. The level and scale might be different, but the intensity inside me and time spent on it hasn't really changed. Every day, I draw pictures, write, and create game systems until I get tired. In that way, these girls have stepped out onto the stage far more than me, so I can really feel a difference there.

Anyway, the chat.

"Did you see the anime? We just got the moving Episodes 9 and 10 with Nee-chan's boobs, Asama-san's boobs and thighs, and Zwei Fräulein's kiss scene, so you just can't wait for more, can you?"

"If you keep getting so carried away, I'm gonna kick your ass."

"What's with that intensity that makes me think you have two exclamation points over your head? Are you okay?"

"Besides, it's not like you actually made that, right?"

"Yeah, the staff is amazing! Allow me to smoothly say that again:

the staff is amazing! Oh, and the volume with this book has Episodes 4 and 5 in it."

"Which ones are those?"

"Watch them!!"

"Yeah, but I'd have to start watching from the beginning. …I haven't read the novel, you see."

"Damn you!!"

Anyway, my background music while working was Acceleration on the Rooftop. That's the song when Adele does her triple spin attack in Episode 1. I never thought I would be working to the soundtrack for an adaption of my own novel.

Anyway, Parts A and B asked the question "Who is attempting to enjoy themselves?" Please wait for II-A which is coming next.

December 2011. A morning of sporadic snow.

-Kawakami Minoru

Notes

1. ↑ Toroi means “slow” especially in respect to intelligence.
2. ↑ Oppai means breasts.